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WINTER 1999
NUMBER 595

AMAZING STORIES®

Miss Million

by Jack Williamson

Shrinkers & Movers

by George Zebrowski

Commentary by

Frederik Pohl

Vincent Di Fate

Cover Story

When Push Comes to Shove

by Josepha Sherman
and Susan Schwartz

VOLUME 24 ISSUE 3 • WDC0002

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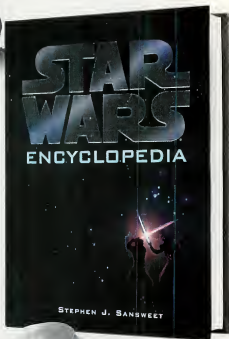
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AMAZING STORIES



VOLUME 70
ISSUE 3
NUMBER 595

About the Cover Artist

Joseph De Vito demonstrated one aspect of his skill and his versatility in creating the painting of *Seven of Nine* for this issue's cover. In a career spanning nearly two decades, he has painted hundreds of book covers, specializing in science fiction, fantasy, horror, and discussion. In addition, he has contributed widely to



the fields of advertising, magazines, and comics in the form of covers, trading cards, posters, and sculpture, involving everything from nature to wildlife.

As a sculptor, his pieces include the first authorized *Tarzan* statue; the *Superman Masterpiece Edition* statue and the *Wonder Woman* figure for DC Comics; and the sculpting itself, including for several of the major dinosaur toys for *The Lost World: Jurassic Park*.

His work has won numerous awards from regional to worldwide shows, competitions, and conventions. His creations have appeared in all of the *Spectrums* art annuals and in *Infinite Worlds*, the definitive history of science fiction art and artists.

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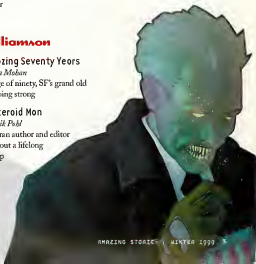
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Dispatches

History Lesson

I had just stumbled upon one of my best childhood friends, whom I thought had died years ago.

Macfadden or MacKinnon?

Dear Kim,

It's great to see *AMAZING Stories* back again. Unfortunately, I must bring to your attention an incorrect fact in Bruce Sterling's otherwise excellent article "It All Started Out Being Amazing." Mr. Sterling states that Bernarr Macfadden bought out Hugo Gernsback. A quick check of Tom Perry's article, "Experiment in Bankruptcy," in the May 1978 *AMAZING* indicates that Bergen A. MacKinnon was the successful bidder for Hugo Gernsback's magazines.

DAVID A. HERRINGTON
Louisville KY



BRUCE STERLING RESPONDS:

Oh, MacKinnon bought *AMAZING* all right—at least, his name was on the documents—but that "fact" is not the whole story. I refer you to *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* by John Clute and Peter Nicholls, in the article on *AMAZING Stories*.

I quote:

"Gernsback lost control of Experimentor [Experimentor Publishing Company, AMAZING's publisher] in 1929 and it was acquired by B. A. MacKinnon [note spelling] and H. K. Fly, who were almost certainly operating as front men for Bernarr Macfadden. The name of the company was modified more than once, then changed to Radio-Science Publications in 1930, then to Tek Publications in 1931; but these name changes were cosmetic; in fact, Macfadden employees, and Macfadden himself was listed as publisher and owner in 1931; he did not interfere with his editors."

The SF Encyclopedia article about Gernsback, Hugo (1884-1967) further declares that "Experimentor Publishing Company was forced into bankruptcy, almost certainly by Bernarr Macfadden."

I doubt it can be absolutely proved at this late date that the wily Macfadden outmaneuvered Gernsback (who was a novice publisher and basically a radio mail-order guy), drove Gernsback's young company into the ground through sharp competitive practices, and then

used a couple of cut-out henchmen, Fly and MacKinnon, to buy the ruined company. I can't prove it—I'm just following the SF Encyclopedia in insinuating it. But in any case, Macfadden was definitely running *AMAZING* himself within a mere two years, after further blurring his tracks with the name changes.

The pulp publishing boom was a rough school; it wasn't built by gentlemen publishers and shrinking violets. Gernsback went bust temporarily, but he came charging back with *Air Wonder Stories*, *Science Wonder Stories*, *Scientific Detective Monthly*, *Amazing Detective Tales*, and *Superworld Comics*, not to mention *Sexology* magazine. Men were men in the heroic days of the old sci-fi pulps.

It Certainly Stands Out

Dear Mr. Mohan,

Hugo Gernsback always wanted his magazine (or "prozine") to be the best quality one and the most attractive one on the newsstands. To this day you have carried it out quite well. It is high quality and it certainly stands out among the other science fiction mags on the rack. It's not as dull and drab as the colorless digests, which aren't nearly as "snappy" as this fine one is.

I am a fourteen-year-old SF fan, and have been one for at least two years. Included in my collection of SF materials you may even find a few original *AMAZING Stories* from the late 20s and early 30s. I find this new version just as stunning, with great writing. I enjoyed "Recessions" by Diane Duane in #594 and, oh, what lovely art is featured for that story. Give my regards to the fabulous artists Mark Zug and Brian Despain. Please continue to show their work.



TIM HOLM
Victoria BC

Instantly Transformed

Dear Kim,

I am nearly fifty-four years old. But when I discovered the new *AMAZING* (on the rack at Thriftway next to

Discover) I was instantly transformed into a boy of eleven. My wife, who was with me at the time, will be telling everyone how, in my excitement, I made a spectacle of myself at the checkout, entering the clerk's space and tossing the magazine onto the scanner, causing \$4.95 to be added to the bill of the customer ahead of me. I think I can be forgiven my lapse into childhood, however, since I had just stumbled upon one of my best childhood friends, whom I thought had died years ago.

I was eleven when I first encountered *AMAZING Stories* in the garage in a box filled with strange magazines the length and width of comics but much thicker and with untrimmed, ragged edges. The covers pictured men in space suits firing ray guns and women (usually in the arms of the men) wearing almost nothing at all. And the titles! *AMAZING Stories*, *Startling Stories*, *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, *Planet Stories*, and *Captain Future*. During the next year and a half I devoured the stories in the browning pages of these magazines. At the end of that time my Navy Dad was transferred to a small town in Ohio's Amish country to try (very successfully) to recruit boys just seven years older than I.

It was there, in Coshocton, Ohio, in a yellow brick building the size of a walk-in closet I discovered a new issue of *AMAZING*. The May 1957 issue was far different from the issues of the mid 1940s I had been reading. The new *AMAZING* was much smaller, about the size of *TV Guide*. Its edges were smooth, and while the old magazine had contained a "full-length novel" in every issue, the longest story in this slimmed-down *AMAZING* was only a novelette. When I had finished reading the magazine, I sat down and scratched out a letter to the editor outlining my gripe.

Somewhere on Route 66 (it might have been in Albuquerque), on the way to my dad's new station in San Diego, we stopped at a small grocery to pick up a snack. There, on the magazine rack, was the newest issue of *AMAZING Stories*. On the cover: a man chained to a tiny asteroid. Inside: my letter, followed by a suggestion

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Dispatches

from the editor that if I wanted longer stories I should use the form on the back cover to join the Science Fiction Book Club (which I did a year later).

AMAZING and the other SF magazines continued to be my closest companions through junior high and high school and into college. While there I tried my hand at writing, and turned out a few science fiction stories of my own. One of them was published in *AMAZING Stories*. A twenty-year writer's block ended my aspirations to write professionally, and I've gone on to do other things to make my living (fifteen years of teaching and twenty as an artist). Receiving that check from the oldest science fiction magazine in the world was one of the proudest moments of my life, and I am very happy to experience her resurrection.

DALE RANDES

Vashon/Maury Island WA

A Tricky Balancing Act

Dear Kim,

I very much enjoyed the first issue of *AMAZING*, and look forward to the ones to come. The presentation values are excellent—and thus totally unacceptable for a science fiction magazine, which should be a drab thing poorly printed on pulp. (What's that, Mr. Edelmann? Oh. Never mind.) Mining the old issues for letters to the editor was a genius stroke. I hope you'll leaven the letters page with older missives even after the real-time pipeline fills.

As a writer, I am interested in the mix of stories: two set in a franchise universe (that's not a derogatory term, see below), two featuring well-known characters from mainstream SF, two in experimental voice and two straight narrative, the last four not especially deep. It, along with the other features, suggests you are handling a particularly tricky balancing act.

I know some old SF hands think *Star Trek* and the like aren't "real SF." (Let's see: omniscient Organians, FTL starships, stalwart heroes wielding ravaging beams of incandescent energies... gee, I don't think Doc Smith would have had any problems with it.) On a pure business level, writers fear they push other works off the shelf at all but the largest bookstores. And given publishers'

reluctance to maintain a midlist today, that may be true.

But it's clearly possible to write a good, interesting, thought-provoking story with a canon. There is a place for both kinds of literature.

And it appears to be *AMAZING*. I imagine your intended audience embraces both the traditional SF fan and the younger gamer that *Wizards of the Coast* built itself by serving. So, you present news of the industry and some of *AMAZING*'s rich history. You publish stories in the well-known franchise and offer a taste of the range SF is capable of—and, like introducing a young man to a good whiskey, you start with the lighter blends, and plan to work your way up to the Islay malts.

This is going to be fun!

DAVIDSON CORRY
Seattle WA

Eight Planets? How Come?

Dear Kim,

The 593rd issue of *AMAZING Stories* is, indeed, a beauty of the first order.

And it is great to see the original SF magazine back again. This issue stresses the historical importance of *AMAZING* and, to me, it was like a trip backwards in a time machine. The issue gets off to a great start with your editorial (and the montage of *AMAZING* covers), followed by Bruce Sterling's impressive commentary, and just keeps going.

The letter referring to 1934 Editor T. O'Connor Sloane's comment that man would never reach the moon is interesting. It reminds me of a statement made in a 1936 story about "the eight planets of the solar system." I fired off a letter (a very youthful one) saying, "How come? There are nine planets in the solar system." To which the staid, conservative Dr. Sloane replied, "I'm not thoroughly convinced that Pluto is a planet—perhaps only a runaway moon of Neptune." (I am paraphrasing here as I haven't the issues and letter in hand.) However, time may very well prove Dr. Sloane to be correct because many years later I read an article in a science journal that developed the same idea. Of course, there could be another reason why "eight planets" was mentioned: Sloane was noted for accepting stories and holding them for years.

This one may have been accepted in 1929 (before the discovery of Pluto) and held until 1936.

ROBERT A. MADLE
Rockville MD

Lived up to Your Name

Dear *AMAZING Stories*,

You've certainly lived up to your name. I just picked up your Summer '98 issue and read Eliot Finstiel's amazing story "Crane Fly." I'm glad he wrote it and I'm glad that you published it. I look forward to reading more of his work.

BRENDA GRIFFITY
Waco TX

Maybe I Was Just Rebellious

Dear Editor,

I have grown up around the science fiction world without ever really being a part of it. My parents are science fiction readers, but I never really got into it. I thought I was disinterested, but maybe I was just rebellious. After receiving the first two "new" issues of *AMAZING Stories* as a gift from my parents, I am in awe of my reaction. I found myself unable to put them down. Thank you for introducing me to a world I should have entered years ago. I especially liked the "Sense of Wonder" story in the first issue, and the quacky "Dr. Science" responses in the second issue. I hope you continue to print more articles along these lines. I'm sure my parents would thank you as well for finally making me enjoy science fiction, that is, if I ever admit it to them....

KATHRYN MICHAELS
Phoenix AZ



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The Observatory

by Vincent Ol Fata

The Holographic Eye

DAVID AWOKE to the instant realization that they were unharmed, even though the fall had been enough to knock them both out. The underground world in which he found himself was oppressively dark, yet the nearby walls radiated an eerie, greenish glow sufficient to dimly reveal an expanse of tunnel forged through solid rock. The walls were a bizarre patchwork of craggy facets and bubbled, slaglike stretches that looked as though they had been torn with a tremendous, blistering heat. As the glow began to fade, the boy leaned forward to see if Dr. Blake was awake.

Just then, Patricia Blake opened her eyes to the sight of two large forms looming over her in the dark, and let out a scream. Startled, David looked up. In the failing light he could make out the towering, immobile shapes standing before them. With their huge, blank eyes and smooth, inscrutable faces, there seemed to be no native intelligence there, no personality, no hint of self-awareness or individuality; as though these fearsome beings were stamped out of a common mold, like so many mannequins.

The boy remembered Stuart Kelston's words in the observatory earlier that day. He had spoken of a theory in which the Martians, facing an increasingly hostile planetary environment, had moved underground, had bred a race of synthetic slaves to do their bidding, and now spent their time patrolling the gulf between the worlds in gigantic "mother ships" in a vigilant effort to protect their zone of survival. Dr. Kelston used a new and unfamiliar word to describe the artificial humans, one that stuck in David's young mind and now made its way up his constricting throat, out of his mouth and into the dank, musty air of the passageway. "Mutants!"

The creatures lifted the two of them up and carried them kicking and screaming down the long, winding corridor to a great metal ship that lay nestled at the center of a bizarre network of twisting tunnels and hidden warrens. David recognized the ship as the same curious object he had seen disappear into the sand pit behind his house the previous night.

Once inside, Pat and David were carried into a circular chamber. At the far side of it, two more of the mutants carefully placed a large transparent globe on a pedestal. The sphere contained a living being, a golden creature with a grotesquely enlarged cranium and expressive eyes. The creature's queer eyes were in constant motion, exerting some sort of telepathic control over its silent minions as they moved deliberately about the chamber. Pat fainted at the grotesque sight, and the two lumbering mutants who carried them to the ship lifted her slender form and positioned it face down on an examining table.

The fluid rhythms of machinery murmured softly as a bright, slender rod descended through the center of a transparent cylinder that jatted out of the ceiling at an odd angle. At the end of the rod a needle spun, lowering toward the back of Dr. Blake's neck. David looked up at the whirling needle, with its diminutive, x-shaped tip, and watched it gleam obscenely in the greenish light. He knew this shape, knew the tiny star that it left at the base of its victims' skulls, and of its terrible, sinister purpose. With this needle the Martians implanted a small control device into the brain, turning their victims into zombies—men and women without souls or free wills, or any of the attributes that would distinguish them as human. . . .



The preceding "story" is based on events that appeared in a modestly produced 1953 SF film titled *Invasion from Mars*. Although many people acquainted with it are not likely to identify it as a masterpiece, they might describe its images as unforgettable and note its dreamlike qualities—especially if they were first exposed to it as children. Taking that idea a step further, Dr. Kenneth Ring, a professor of psychology at the University of Connecticut and the foremost authority on near-death experiences, believes that *Invasion from Mars* contains within it the basic UFO abduction scenario as it is now being recounted by a growing number of people who believe they have had such experiences. Are these individuals merely relating what they've seen on movie screens or read in the pages of science fiction magazines? Or are these events, fantastic though they may be, really happening?

In his book *The Omega Project: Near-Death Experiences, UFO Encounters and Mind at Large* (William Morrow, 1992), Dr. Ring presents an impressive body of evidence to demonstrate that virtually all near-death experiences are essentially the same, and that this also seems to be true of



◀ In this homage to one of the great cultural institutions of the 1950s, a Tyrannosaurus steps off the motion picture screen to terrify the patrons of a drive-in theater. Here the line between the virtual film experience and reality is blurred. Could fantastic images in books and films be offering grist for the subconscious mind in a collective effort to save the human race from extinction? This painting originally appeared in 1995 as the cover art to the DFW Books edition of *It Came from the Drive-In*, an anthology of science fiction stories edited by Norman Partridge and Martin H. Greenberg.



about the author

Vincent Di Fate is regarded as one of the world's major illustrators of futuristic themes. In his thirty-year career, he has produced more than three thousand published works of science fiction, astronomical, and aerospace art for such diverse clients as IBM, Reader's Digest, the National Geographic Society, CBS, and NASA. He has received many awards for his work, including the Hugo Award, the 1990 *Lexicon Award for Lifetime Contribution to the Science Fiction Field*, and the 1998 *Clayton Award for Lifetime Artistic Achievement*.

In addition to his illustrious work, Di Fate has lectured and written extensively about the methods and history of his craft and has been a consultant for MCA/Universal, 20th Century Fox, and MGM/United Artists. He is the author and editor of *Imagize Words: The Fantastic Voices of Science Fiction Art*, published by Fiksy/Penguin in 1997.

UFO abductions. He notes remarkable similarities in the psychological profiles of individuals who have these kinds of experiences (many of Ring's interview subjects underwent early childhood traumas, for example) and proposes that there may be a personality type that is "encounter prone." These people, he maintains, are not insane, nor do they have particular difficulty in grasping reality, but rather, they are highly sensitive, imaginative, and intelligent, and often possess intense spiritual beliefs, even though they may not actively participate in any organized faith.

Images from Our Roots

Ring's observations about the presence of strong similarities in UFO abduction accounts suggest the possibility that these bizarre events may be examples of the collective unconscious at work. Carl Jung, whose theories along with those of Sigmund Freud formed the cornerstones of modern psychology, first identified the collective unconscious when he recognized common images and themes in the dreams and fantasies of his patients that could not be attributed to their personal life experiences. Jung called these elements icons or archetypes, believed they were common to everyone, and found evidence of them in folk-

lore, traditions, and religious beliefs of many diverse cultures. It was his conviction, and one that is now widely accepted among psychologists, that these archetypes are deeply rooted in the human subconscious and extend back to the earliest beginnings of our species.

To understand whether purported UFO abductees are actually being spirited away by aliens and examined and/or implanted with any tiny devices, it is important to recognize the absence of physical evidence to support these claims. Although the dearth of evidence alone does not dismiss such allegations, it does make verification nearly impossible. The late astronomer Carl Sagan, when asked about his feelings on the subject, often said that extraordinary claims required extraordinary evidence. Short of accepting on faith the often expressed contention of a government conspiracy to suppress evidence, there is precious little we can do without access to these materials, if indeed they exist. Then, too, a distinction needs to be made between a belief in the existence of extraterrestrial life (one any seasoned SF reader might consider) and the likelihood that these beings would cross the vast interstellar void simply to buzz airplanes, abduct housewives, mutilate livestock, and cut circles in remote fields. Fifty

The Observatory



July 1926

Making one's self invisible has always been one of the great fascinations to the human race. And no wonder! Imagine all the mischief we could make, all the eavesdropping we could do, and all the secrets we could unravel! Scientifically speaking, it is not impossible to make a body invisible. Recent experiments made by a New England professor of chemistry show that when certain liquids are injected into organic tissues, they become practically transparent. The professor succeeded in making small animals entirely transparent and practically invisible. Who knows that in the future, by some means of chemicals, combined with certain rays, it may not be possible for us to make ourselves entirely invisible?

Editor's introduction to "Dr. Hsuehensai's Secrets" by Clement Furutani

Subtitle: "The Secret of the Invisible Girl"



years or more of these reports have failed to provide the basis for a rationale for this eccentric pattern of behavior. Yet there is no doubt that thousands of credible witnesses have seen UFOs, have seen them at close range and in startling detail, and some believe they have even been taken aboard alien spacecraft and subjected to some sort of physical contact with unearthly beings.

The extraterrestrial hypothesis (the belief that UFOs are interplanetary spaceships under the control of creatures not of this earth), an idea once met with skepticism and even laughter, has grown in public acceptance as an increasing number of credible witnesses have stepped forward to speak openly of their experiences. To find a plausible alternative explanation to this curious state of affairs, and perhaps to also explain the growing popularity of science fiction ideas and images, we might consider some recent notions about the nature of reality and the way human beings perceive it.

Holograms in Our Heads

Although there is still controversy over precisely how the human brain works, some researchers have come to believe that it may function holographically in both its wakeful and unconscious states. One of the leading proponents of this idea is neurophysiologist Karl Pribram of Stanford University, who wrote the now classic textbook *Languages of the Brain* (Wadsworth Publishing, 1977). Pribram, and a growing number of his colleagues, believe that the brain works as a receptor of interference patterns that originate in our surroundings (*out there*), but that are given the illusion of form and dimensionality inside our heads (*in here*) in a way that strongly resembles a hologram.

A hologram is the result of a process in which a single beam of light from a laser is split in two. One branch of the beam is reflected off the subject to be recorded, while the other is bounced off a system of mirrors and through a diffusion lens where it then encounters the first beam, creating an interference pattern. The pattern, which carries visual information about the subject, is recorded on a photographic plate. When light is shined through the plate, the information it contains is reconstructed in the form of a three-dimensional image. Unlike other, similar photographic techniques (like the stereophotography of the 1950s 3-D movies, for example), one can actually walk around a holographic projection and observe it from virtually any angle, as if the projected object were actually present.

Scientists who embrace this concept note how holography can better explain the extraordinarily complex and efficient process of human memory.

The most commonly accepted theoretical models of brain memory are based on storage and retrieval principles like those used in computers. Undermining the integrity of these models is the fact that the brain simply lacks the physical volume to accommodate such a space-consuming process. In addition, evidence suggests that memory information is not localized in the brain, as was once believed, but is distributed throughout it, making the computer storage analogy far less likely—for that kind of system to work, a specific bit of information needs to be situated in a designated location. And, again, we see another startling affinity with the hologram: Shatter a holographic plate and each individual shard contains the whole image, dramatically demonstrating that the interference pattern containing the image is uniformly distributed over the entire surface of the plate—precisely the way memory information appears to be situated in the brain.

Dr. David Bohm is a leading figure in modern physics and author of the book *Quantum Theory* (Prentice-Hall, 1951), the premier work on the curious realm of subatomic particles. He has advanced the view that the universe itself may function like a vast hologram, thus offering a controversial new paradigm for the physical sciences that supports and complements the efforts of Pribram and others. To integrate major tenets of quantum physics into his theory, such as the Principle of Complementarity (that there is no reality until it's perceived), formulated in 1927 by Neils Bohr, and Heisenberg's Principle of Uncertainty (that observers change the nature of what they're looking at, just by the act of observing), Bohm suggests that before perception occurs, reality exists in an enfolded state. In his view, mind, matter and energy merge as an uninterrupted whole to form our perception of what's real. While objects actually exist in the *out there* space surrounding us, the simple act of observation causes matter and energy to unfold to form a concept of the world that is monitored through the senses, and is recognized and interpreted in the brain (*in here*). One way to visualize this is to imagine a pop-up book before the page is turned and the folded picture is revealed, and then after the picture emerges from the page full blown into three-dimensional space.

Bohm's unique version of the universe, when considered with the holographic mind concept, may help us to understand how rational human beings can report UFO abductions with absolute conviction, because it suggests that reality is projected into space by our efforts to observe the outside world. His concept holds out the possibility that dislocated archetypes in the brain might somehow make their way into our

surroundings—perhaps even to be seen and shared by others. This is not the same as saying that UFOs and the like are hallucinations or the result of mass hysteria, as was the frequent rationale during the U.S. Air Force's years of official investigation (1947–1969). When carefully considered, the majority of UFO sightings possess the characteristics of what seem to be primarily visual events (over the last fifty years and in the thousands of cases reported, the lack of physical evidence would seem to bear this out). They soar through the air, hover, bank in turns of ninety degrees at high acceleration, and reverse directions instantaneously in maneuvers that can exceed the tolerances of all known metals and the limits of human endurance. And they disappear abruptly, like an image from a slide projector when the bulb unexpectedly fails. This new view of reality may offer explanations for religious visions, spectral manifestations, sea serpents, and a host of other eerie happenings that have been reported for centuries, yet have evaded authoritative scientific examination. The key difference in the holographic explanation as compared to an hallucination is the prospect that a real object may actually exist, however briefly, *out there* in three-dimensional space.

"Aliens" in Our Midst

As for the aliens themselves, phantom humanoids are almost certainly among the exotic treasures in the Pandora's box of the collective unconscious. They are the hoenunculi of a thousand myths, the fairy tales of ancient cultures, the totems of primitive tribes, the Kachinas of native America. They scurry across the sprawling landscapes of Bosch and Bruegel, they bark in the nocturnal gloom of Harry Fuseli's *The Nightmare* and populate an unaccountable number of surrealist canvases. They are the rambling, reanimated corpses of poog, mad Dr. Frankenstein and of five thousand zombie movies. They are the hulking creature in *The Thing*, the inscrutable Gort in *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, the lumbering Mutants of *Invaders from Mars*, the withered, anthropomorphic invaders from *Earth vs. the Flying Saucers*, *Invasion of the Saucer-Men*, and a dozen more 1950s SF movies. They skulked in the dark corners of *The Twilight Zone* and were sentinels at the threshold of *The Outer Limits*. They stood in the shadow of the Devil's Tower in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, stalked the steel corridors of the *Nostromo* in *Alien*, were gun-hunting extraterrestrials in *Predator*, and they put Mulder and Scully through their weekly paces in *The X-Files*. They have appeared on the covers of countless pulp magazines, comic books, and paperback, and they show no signs of going

away anytime soon. It is only reasonable that in an age before science, when magic was all there was to explain the ways of the world, they would be understood to be demons and ghosts. Now, in our technological times, we see them as visitors from far worlds and advanced civilizations. Suspecting that they are the archetypes that dwell in the human psyche and are a cumulative by-product of the collective human experience, one might ask, Why are they here and what do they mean?

Kenneth Ring speculates that the growing presence of encounter-prone individuals may be a sign of a new step in human evolution, and Dr. Montague Ullman, founder of the Dream Laboratory at the Malmonides Medical Center in Brooklyn, offers that there may be a telepathic interconnectedness among individuals during the dream process that utilizes these archetypes in a way that is crucial to the survival of the entire human species. Physicist Fred Alan Wolf, in his fascinating book *The Dreaming Universe* (Simon and Schuster, 1995), makes the case that these universal ideas and icons are reflected in countless works of literary and visual art, posing the prospect that artists and writers, too, may be an important component of a greater picture in which their artistic works enlarge the dialogue by bringing these archetypes into the bright light of conscious scrutiny.

For most of my life I've been drawn to the images and ideas of the fantastic, and for the last thirty years or so, I've made my living as a science fiction illustrator. I've always felt there was something of great purpose and consequence endemic to this sort of subject matter. But only recently have my thoughts and feelings begun to clarify into some of the ideas I have presented here. I don't know the Big Answers, or even the Big Questions, and I suspect I never will. In a way I feel very much like the character Roy Neary in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*.

A prototypical everyman, Neary has had an extraordinary and puzzling experience that he cannot fully understand or intellectually assimilate into his limited worldview. He looks down at his dinner plate, into a steaming mound of mashed potatoes, and declares, "This means something!" That brings to mind for me the countless times I've sat before a blank board and made marks in the moments before a recognizable image begins to emerge. At the start, the marks are merely lines and smudges. With much effort, they eventually coalesce into shapes. Just before pulling those shapes into the various directions that will identify them for the viewer, I pause and study them and I invariably ask myself if, indeed, this might mean something. ☛



June 1935

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by Ward Moore

September 1945

All I had to do was close my eyes and I was a winged men living in another world in time.

Editor's introduction to
"Five Worlds to Conquer"
by Elroy Area

November 1954

Grandma knew nothing of space ships, but she could run the pump back on the farm and the pilot was darn glad she could!

Editor's introduction to
"Grandma Goes to Mars"
by Robert Bloch



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The Audiobook Subgenre

SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY HAVE always provided a fertile artistic basis for audio dramatization, since the author's words (accentuated by a few sound effects) enable the listener to paint a truly fantastic picture in his or her mind, thereby allowing the listener to share in the creative process itself.

From the lighthearted family space opera of Tom Corbett to the outrageous seriousness of Orson Welles's Halloween production of *War of the Worlds*, the world of the

extent) by Caedmon, whose catalog of records included most of the works of William Shakespeare and the major classical poets, as well as certain recorded productions of live performances of such playwrights as Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, and Jean-Paul Sartre. Most of these works were aimed for the educational/library markets, and commercially released only to certain

repackaging old radio plays), works of science fiction and fantasy were almost completely unavailable in the early decades of the audio subgenre.

The development of the cassette tape and the compact disc made audio an infinitely more portable entertainment medium, and paved the way for a more widespread market for spoken word performance in a format that has been generally labeled as "books on tape" or "audiobooks."

As with media tie-ins in book format, numerous major publishers have expanded into this subgenre, exploiting it either with releases of abridged readings of best-selling authors' works (usually simultaneous with the book's print publication premiere), or with ongoing media tie-in audio releases.

Pocket Books has taken advantage of the audio opportunities of its *Star Trek* licenses with recorded abridgements of its *Trek* novels

The development of the cassette tape and the compact disc made audio a more portable entertainment medium, and paved the way for a more widespread market for spoken word performance in a format that has been generally labeled as "books on tape" or "audiobooks."



fantastic has been well represented in the audio performance genre. Back in the age of vinyl, when commercial recordings were flat black platters spun at varying speeds of 33 $\frac{1}{3}$, 78, and 45 rpm, the spoken word/dramatic reading audio genre was dominated (perhaps to a monopolistic

upscale record store chains in the major markets.

Unfortunately, the Caedmon selections in the realm of the fantastic were pretty much limited to work such as Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, the witches of *Macbeth*, Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, and views of Hell as described by either Dante or Sartre.

With the possible exception of recorded versions of Welles's traumatic *War of the Worlds* broadcast (from the Longines Symphonette Society, which specialized in

and audiobook originals, utilizing the vocal talents of notable actors from any of the four *Star Trek* television series supplemented by various sound effects. Though they are not strictly voiced readings of the abridged text, most of these audio renditions fall slightly short of full audio dramatizations, since they consist usually of a single narrator with occasional dialogue supplied by a featured performer (such as George Takei in the role of Sulu).

Pocket Books, however,

also has another audio program, whose innovation of the format is in reality an ingenious step backward to the days of Orson Welles's Mercury Theater and his rendition of *War of the Worlds*. This program, *Alien Voices*, is the brainchild of actors Leonard Nimoy and John de Lancie, and writer-producer Nat Segaloff, and contains fully dramatized multivoice audiobook adaptations of classic science fiction novels per-

own vocal talents to the productions, both de Lancie and Nimoy have shared in the directing and script-writing responsibilities, and each production is complete with original music and a stereophonic soundscape.

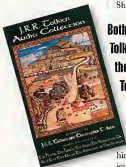
Nimoy and de Lancie enlisted the vocal talents of other *Trek* alumni such as Roxann Dawson, Ethan Phillips, and Kate Mulgrew (from *Star Trek: Voyager*), Andrew Robinson, Armin Shimerman, and Nana Visitor

dramatization field, provides an entertaining introduction to the classics of the fantastic for newcomers of all ages, and is thus a perfectly innovative complement to the *Star Trek* audio program.

Both Bantam and HarperCollins have also used their audio divisions to complement their print publishing programs by providing audio versions of the books of various licenses they have controlled. Usually a product of this type consists of an

certain contemporary authors. Of particular note for fans of science fiction is a title designated the Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. Audio Collection, which presents the author reading featured selections from *Slaughterhouse Five*, *Breakfast of Champions*, and *Cat's Cradle*, as well as the shorter works "Welcome to the Monkey House," "New Dictionary," and "Harrison Bergeron."

Both HarperCollins and Bantam also present audio



Both HarperCollins and Bantam present audio versions of J. R. R. Tolkien's work, with Harper adding a sense of literary authenticity to their J. R. R. Tolkien Audio Collection through the vocal talents of Tolkien and his son Christopher.

formed by actors well known in the genre.

"After years of being associated with other people's projects, we wanted to enter the next century at the helm of our own," said Nimoy. "*Alien Voices* gives us a chance to work with other artists who also want to branch out, yet still provide audiences with the quality they've come to expect from us."

"I was raised on the classics—Jules Verne, H. G. Wells and others," noted de Lancie. "Now we can bring these to even wider audiences by means of new technologies and old friends. . . . We also didn't want to do just single reads. We wanted to turn the material into full-length plays."

In addition to lending their

(from *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*), and even a cameo vocal appearance by the legendary Captain Kirk himself, William Shatner, to join them in an ensemble company akin to old-time radio's own Mercury Theater.

To date, *Alien Voices* audiobooks have appeared for such classic works of the fantastic as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Lost World*, Jules Verne's *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, and H. G. Wells's *The Invisible Man* and *The Time Machine*. The Sci-Fi Channel has broadcast public performances of three of the ensemble's recording sessions, which also helped to accentuate the nostalgic debt to old-time radio that the company has embraced. More performers are being invited into the company, and new productions are on the drawing board.

The *Alien Voices* program, in addition to being a breath of fresh air in the audio

abridged reading of the text supplemented by various audio special effects to provide mood and/or background ambience. Bantam usually utilizes Anthony Heald (Hanibal Lecter's upcoming meal in the closing-credits scene of *Silence of the Lambs*) for its *Star Wars* series (though the BBC audio production of the original trilogy of films is available in multi-tape collections from High-bridge Audio), while Harper has used Gillian Anderson (Scully), Mitch Pileggi (Skinner), and John Neville (*The Well-Manicured Man*) for their *X-Files* series. The audio adaptations of the films *Lost in Space* and *Godzilla* (both from HarperCollins) also feature narration from performers in each film (notably Mimi Rogers and Doug Savant, respectively).

The HarperCollins list also contains a number of titles from the original Caedmon backlist, as well as the work of

versions of J. R. R. Tolkien's work, with Harper adding a sense of literary authenticity to their J. R. R. Tolkien Audio Collection through the vocal talents of Tolkien himself (and his son Christopher), while Bantam utilizes the acclaimed BBC dramatic multivoice radio version. (It is notable that Dove audio has taken a similar tack to HarperCollins with its renditions of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* series, opting to release the books as read by Douglas Adams, rather than the wonderful BBC multivoice versions).

Time-Warner Audio Books, like Bantam's and Harper's programs, is mostly composed of single-reader abridgements (such as Tony Roberts's two-cassette rendition of J. V. Jones's *The Barbud Cat*)—though recently Time-Warner has outdone itself with a full-cast audio drama rendition of the novelization *Kingdom Come*, based on an

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award-winning graphic novel by Mark Waid and Alex Ross. This audiobook features a wide variety of vocal talents provided by a literal "who's who" of DC Comics that includes Denny O'Neil (Batman group editor/writer) as the Phantom Stranger and Mike Carlin (Superman group editor/DC Executive Editor) as Zeus. Half of the fun here is matching the voice to

the classic drug-era new journalism masterpiece. The CD is still available through bookstores and record stores, usually by special order. (This vocal dramatization precedes the 1998 film version.)

A gem of a different tint, though no less exotic, is *Closed on Account of Rabies: Poems and Tales of Edgar Allan Poe*, a two-CD set on Polygram's Mercury Records label, containing dramatic and musical renditions of numerous Poe classics by an unusual cross section of performers

of his own works were trailblazing efforts in the spoken word vein even back in the days of vinyl when Casdmoon's Shakespeare recordings (and other dramatists' works) were the dominant force in the 1960s and 1970s. As anyone who has heard Ellison read can attest, no one can do justice to his award-winning prose better than the author himself. One of Ellison's recordings was even nominated for a Grammy in the spoken word category, coming in

required is more than worth it, considering the quality of the recordings.

Other smaller labels known for their exceptional audio work include The Reader's Chair for works of Lois McMaster Bujold, Star Quest Entertainment for a wonderful adaptation of Stanley Weinbaum's *A Martian Odyssey*, and Sunset, which produces the work of Roger Zelazny. All are available via special order from your local bookseller or audio dealer. ☛



Nimoy and de Lancie enlisted the vocal talents of other *Trek* alumni... even a cameo vocal appearance by the legendary Captain Kirk himself, William Shatner, to join them in an ensemble company akin to old-time radio's own Mercury Theater.

both the comic-book character and the DC VIP.

Other numerous gems of recording wizardry are available on smaller labels.

Margaritaville Records (Jimmy Buffett's label) released on CD in 1996 a multivoice dramatic audio presentation of Hunter S. Thompson's classic of drug-enhanced fantasy/realism, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, which features Harry Dean Stanton as the Narrator, Maury Chaykin as Dr. Gonzo, and Jim Jarmusch as Raoul Duke (others in the cast include Joan Cusack, Buck Henry, Laurie Metcalf, and "Simpsons" stars Dan Castellaneta and Harry Shearer) with vocal cameos by Hunter S. himself and *Rolling Stone* editor Jann Wenner. Music and mayhem are artistically synched with the dialogue, making this a masterful 26th-anniversary rendition of

that includes Christopher Walken and Gabriel Byrne as well as Iggy Pop, Doctor John, Marianne Faithfull, and Deborah Harry. Though Walken's "The Raven," Byrne's "The Masque of the Red Death," and Faithfull's "Annabel Lee" were all verily perfect, the other cuts (which include "The Tell-Tale Heart," "Berenice," "The Hallowed Palace," and seven other stories) were also well executed, catering to a wide spectrum of Poe fans.

Both the Thompson and the Poe works also share a cover artist, Ralph Steadman, whose distinctively weird illustrations are wonderfully evocative of the surreal narcotic themes.

Perhaps the most noteworthy ongoing source of audio gems is the Harlan Ellison Recording Collection (abbreviated HERC). Ellison's audio performances

second to no less than Harold Pinter's "No Man's Land" as performed by Sir Ralph Richardson and Sir John Gielgud. As part of HERC, the works have been updated to CD and tape formats including such masterworks as "Repent, Harlequin!" Said the Ticktockman," "A Boy and His Dog," "Yours Truly, Jack the Ripper," and "Jeffrey Is Five," as well as original recordings such as "On the Road with Ellison," and many others.

Unlike all the other audio works mentioned in this article, HERC is not available through the usual retail outlets, and is most easily tracked down by sending a request for the complete catalog (between fifteen and twenty exceptional titles) and ordering information with a SASE to HERC, P.O. Box 55548, Sherman Oaks CA 91413-0548. The extra effort

About the author

Brian M. Thompson was one of the founding editors of the *Warner Books* science fiction and fantasy programs, for which he edited two *Hugo* Award-winning books and numerous other award nominees. He has been nominated for a *Hugo*, has served as a *World Fantasy Award* judge, and is the author of two novels and more than thirty short stories.

His most recent publications as an editor are *The Reel Stuff* and *Mob Magic*, two anthologies done in collaboration with Martin H. Greenberg for DAW Books. Three of his most recent stories appear in the anthologies *Alternate Generals*, *Tales from the Eternal Archives*, and *Things Invisible to See*. He lives in Brooklyn, where he works as a freelance publishing consultant and editor.

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An Amazing Seventy Years

by p a m e l a m o h a n

IN DECEMBER 1928 A SELF-DESCRIBED NAIVE FARM BOY WALKED past a drugstore in Canyon, Texas, and saw the start of his career as a writer of science fiction launched through a plate glass window. In what Jack Williamson describes as his "most rewarding moment," he learned that a manuscript he had submitted to *AMAZING Stories* magazine several months earlier had made it into print. As if that wasn't enough of a thrill for the young writer, his first published story was highlighted in the artwork on the cover.

The painting, by Frank R. Paul, depicted a scene from Williamson's short story, "The Metal Man." Months after making that discovery, Williamson received a whopping twenty-five dollars and a request for more tales from *AMAZING Stories* editor Hugo Gernsback.

"I was twenty years old and a college freshman. I had submitted the story during the summer. It never came back, but I didn't know that it had been accepted. I had been fascinated with the magazine and the science fiction classics in it. I had dreamed of being a writer, and suddenly I was," Williamson said during a recent interview.

Seventy years and 562 publications after Williamson's first sale, he continues to write in the genre he knows and loves best. With this issue, *AMAZING Stories* salutes Williamson's remarkable career, publishes a new Williamson short story and celebrates a seventy-year marriage between the author and the world's first science fiction magazine.

Science fiction has been the center of Williamson's life since the age of eighteen, when a friend loaned him the November 1926 issue of *AMAZING Stories* magazine. It was love at first read.

Williamson wrote "The Metal Man" in the summer of 1928. That also was the summer he wrote an editorial that later won him fifty dollars from *AMAZING Stories*. And it was the summer that his father, Asa Williamson, received a thousand dollars from an oil company to give up future royalty rights should oil be discovered on



the family's ranch. The farm was dry, but the money was the pay dirt that sent Williamson and his sister to college.

The editorial that won Williamson the prize showed that he possessed an inherent feel for the genre and had no trouble translating that talent into print. "Science goes on," he wrote, "with scientification as the searchlight. Here is the picture, if we can but see it. A universe ruled by the human mind. A new golden age of fair cities, of new laws and new machines, of human capabilities undreamed of, a civilization that has conquered matter and Nature, distance and time, disease and death. The idea of the final product of evolution is beyond us. But a sublime picture it is that scientification may build through the ages, and that science may realize for the ultimate advancement of man."

"The Metal Man," a story about a crystalline radioactive life force that turns everything within its reach into metal, so impressed Gernsback that he wrote: "The Metal Man" contains an abundant matter of mystery, adventure and, for a short story, a surprising amount of true science. Unless we are very much mistaken, this story will be hailed with delight by every scientification fan. We hope Mr. Williamson can be induced to write a number of stories in similar vein."

It didn't take much inducement. The

"I sometimes feel a thrill of pride when I see such terms as terraforming, genetic engineering, psionics, prime directive, and androids, that seem to have been slipping out of my own science fiction into general currency."

—John Stewart Williamson,
September 1998



Jack's Life and Times (left to right) Jack, in his words "looking somewhat like the bearer of ill," after receiving the Nebula Grand Master Award in 1978; as a weather forecaster at Hobbs Army Air Base, Hobbs, New Mexico, 1945; as an astronomer in 1978; and at the dedication of the Jack Williamson Science Fiction Library at Eastern New Mexico University, 1982. At bottom, Jack (left) with Samuel R. Delany (middle) and Arthur C. Clarke (right), in 1978.

sale of "The Metal Man" and Gernsback's encouraging words caused the young college student to lose all interest in academia. Williamson eventually dropped out of college to plunge head-first into the writing life.

He sold many stories during those early years. Thirteen of the first twenty-one stories Williamson sold to science fiction magazines were portrayed on their respective covers. He quickly made his mark in the science fiction community and he continued to follow that path until he enlisted in the military in 1942.

The most difficult time in his writing life, Williamson said, was the period after he returned home from serving as an armed forces weather forecaster in the South Pacific in World War II. "The war experience had generally been good for me. I had grown up something of a loner, with no social skills. Serving in a good many different units and learning to work with many different men, I was finding my way a little farther into human society," he said.

Although the science of meteorology was still rather primitive when he was an Army weather forecaster, before the days of satellite cameras, it was still an interesting time for him. "The Army weather school at Chanute Field taught us fast and well—under threat of general duty in the infantry if we washed out. The job kept me off KP, at least most of the time."

Civilian life back at home in New Mexico was a harder adjustment than the military experience had been.

"Though I kept on writing—*The Humanoids*, my best novel, was written in

1947—science fiction had changed as much as I had. Fans who began as kids were growing up, many now writing themselves, often very well."

New science fiction magazines were being launched, and Williamson was intimidated by what he called "brilliant new writers" and new editorial policies.

"I felt baffled until the *New York Sunday News* came to my rescue with a phone call out of the blue inviting me to create a new science fiction comic strip called 'Beyond Mars.' That strip ran for three years. Its cancellation in 1953 prompted Williamson to return to academia.

"Writing 'Beyond Mars' was a great adventure and it paid more money than I had ever earned. My heart was broken when the *News* killed it because it had failed to win back the readers they were losing to Sunday morning TV," he said.

Williamson went on to earn a Ph.D. in English literature. A dissertation he wrote as part of that effort, "H. G. Wells, Critic of Progress: A Study of the Early Fiction," gained him renewed recognition as a serious writer.

"I found that I enjoyed the study of great literature. I got two degrees from Eastern New Mexico University, and the Ph.D. from Colorado University, and found a job here in my own hometown (Portales, New Mexico) that has let me

enjoy a richer life than I might have had writing cartoon strips."

Williamson spent the next twenty years sharing his knowledge as a college professor at ENMU but never strayed far from the science fiction community. "I was able to keep my hand in the science fiction game, thanks in part to such great collaborators as Fred Pohl and Jim Gunn. Beginning back in the 1950s, I've written ten novels in collaboration with Frederik Pohl. He's the ultimate science fiction professional. He has been my editor and my literary agent and my friend for nearly sixty years. Working with him has been a privilege."

Williamson retired from teaching full time in 1977. Yet, each Spring he continues to team up with ENMU Professor Patrice Caldwell to teach courses in creative writing, fantasy, and science fiction.

"I've always been eager to learn all I can about nearly anything. I've been to all the continents, three times to Russia, three times to China. Their histories and their cultures cast new light on our own, and perhaps into the future. I like to visit research facilities. I found enormous excitement in *Voyager's* explorations. A robot explorer, it turned dots of light into worlds of cratered ice that had preserved the history of the solar system. Watching the pictures and data come in, I felt like an actual space explorer," he said.

Williamson is seldom fully satisfied with his work, yet he cannot think of one

The Asteroid Man

by Frederik Pohl

JACK WILLIAMSON HAS AN ASTEROID NAMED AFTER HIM. He also has a library, a lecture series, and heaven knows what all else, all bearing his name. Ordinary citizens may wonder how one mortal human being can have earned so many honors, but they wouldn't ask that question if they knew John Stewart Williamson.

That is a pleasure and an honor that I have been lucky enough to have had for some six decades now, though that span of time didn't start auspiciously. I first became aware of Jack Williamson when I was eleven years old, already a devoted science fiction fan but unfortunately a rather impoverished one. By then I had bought every science fiction magazine I could find in the second-hand stores for a nickel apiece. I might have gone on doing that indefinitely, but Jack spoiled it for me. One day I picked up a copy of *AMAZING STORIES* that was actually quite new. It contained part one of Jack's two-part serial, *The Stone from the Green Star*, and I couldn't wait to see how it came out. I skipped lunch one day and, with the quarter that had saved me, marched up to the local newsstand and bought the next issue, which had the conclusion of the serial.

I have long since forgiven Jack for busting my school-lunch budget. Anyway, it was worth it.

Jack doesn't altogether applaud my taste. *The Stone from the*



No ordinary mortal: Jack (left) with longtime friend and collaborator Frederik Pohl.

appear in book form. But I don't care. I thought it was wonderful.

For that matter, I still think Jack's work is wonderful. I have had a lifetime of enjoyment from his fantasy novels, such as *Darker Than You Think*, and science fiction ones such as *The Humanside*, as well as such shorter pieces as "Jamboree" and "Guinevere for Everybody." I'm not the only one, either. Jack has been enchanting readers for seven decades now, from the 1920s through the 1990s, and I confidently expect that he will go on doing so well into the next millennium.

Writers are not always the most agreeable people to work with. Jack is the exception that tests that rule.

I know this from personal experience. I was Jack's literary agent for several years, his editor for longer than that, and have been his collaborator, on and off, for going on half a century

story he would rewrite, given that opportunity. "That's far from saying any of them are perfect. Each new story comes from what I feel and what I am at the time. I don't often look back at the old ones. When I do, they often seem new enough to be interesting, but I feel no impulse to tinker with them. With the feeling and purpose that shaped a story long forgotten, any attempt to redo it would probably spoil it. Sometimes, however, when an old idea is still alive, it can become the germ of an entirely new story. The dark view of progress in 'With Folded Hands,' my own favorite story, is reflected more briefly in 'Jamboree'."

Williamson said his advice to beginning science fiction writers would be to learn language and technique. "Language is the tool that enables us to learn, to think, to express what we feel. Writing technique takes learning the language one step further. Anything you write—a short story or a novel or a note to a friend—is itself another linguistic form

at the top of the hierarchy that builds up from the phoneme and the word and the sentence. A story works in the way a word does; it is a unit of language that the reader has learned to understand. You can stretch the rules of communication, but you can't ignore them....

"A story, at least for me, begins as something that wants to be whole. A unity of feeling and purpose that wants to be fleshed out with people in action, realized in place and time. The story makes its own law, states its own theme, finds its own materials, drawing more than I ever realize from my unconscious mind. It has to be something I care about. What I have written has always come from my feelings and interests at the time. I once hoped to assemble stories like automobiles from prefabricated parts. I can't do that.

"Some writers have kept journals. I once set out to do that, and set up a file for characters, settings, and story ideas. I found that nothing that went into them

ever came out again."

Today, the no longer naïve farm boy is still doing what he knows and loves best. His newest novel, *The Silken Dagger*, is due to be released by Tor Books in April.

"The story came out of my concerns about the Oklahoma City bombing, the militant militias, and the general sense that we're helpless against the growing power of the government, the great corporations, the media, our whole social system.

"I wanted to say something about freedom—the seeking, private individual in conflict with society. That's something I do care about in a very personal way. The information revolution is writing new rules for that old war, offering us a new liberation, yet threatening us with new ways for society to know and control all we know and feel and think and do.

"The conflict is real. It involves us all. I care about it. The novel, of course, might have taken a thousand different forms. I tried to express my own sense of the plight of the trapped individual, and I'm rather

with him when we aren't working on anything together. For that reason, Jack and I have kept each other company in a number of places around the world, from Rantoul, Illinois, where we both studied weather for the Air Force in World War II, to Socorro, New Mexico, where we checked out some promising (but ultimately unimpressive) flying-saucer reports—not to mention Stonehenge in England and the panda-breeding facility in China's Wo Long Nature Preserve, in the foothills of the Himalayas.

Jack likes to travel, and he has done a mozt of it, with me and without. But when the traveling is over he returns to the high plains of New Mexico, where he has spent his boyhood and most of his life. He lived there, on his father's ranch, when he began selling stories to the magazines. It seemed to young Jack that a successful writer needed an office, or a studio, or anyway some kind of place that was all his own, where he could go and create without interruption from the rest of the family. So he built one for himself, a few dozen yards from the ranch house. It was a plain, one-room wooden shack, but that was good enough for Jack's purposes. The structure was quiet, private, and just right for concentrating on the work in progress, as long as you didn't start worrying about the rattlesnakes that nested under the wooden floor. (The little building is still there, on what is now the cattle ranch of Jack's brother, Jim Williamson. So are the rattlesnakes.)

We think of Jack Williamson as a writer of science fiction. So he is, but he is a lot of other things as well. When World War II was over Jack returned to civilian life and, with the help of the G.I. Bill, to college. He liked learning, and so he kept it up all the way through graduate school, winding up with a Ph.D. and, before long, an appointment as a professor of English in Eastern

New Mexico University, right in his hometown of Portales.

It turned out that he liked teaching, too, especially since he was able to persuade the dean of his department to allow him to teach a course in science fiction.

That took a little persuasion—more than that, it took a lot of trust in young Dr. Williamson—because courses in science fiction were not always considered proper college studies in those days. But the university decided to give Jack his chance, and the course worked out pretty well—well enough so that even now, years after his nominal "retirement" from the ENMU faculty, Jack still comes in to teach it once a year.

Along about the time he got his own science fiction course started, Jack took note of the fact that others in the academic world were doing the same thing he had done. He reasoned that these scattered teachers could work better if they knew of each other's existence, so that they could share ideas and experiences. So Jack was the one who prepared the first complete catalogue of science fiction college courses in the United States. That act had consequences. It led directly to the formation of the organization that became the academic wing of science fiction, the Science Fiction Research Association.

Jack's writing includes nonfiction, such as his critical study of the work of H.G. Wells. His activities have included a stretch as president of the trade union of his craft, the Science Fiction Writers of America. Among his many honors is the Nebula Grand Master Award, something that fewer than two dozen writers have received.

And that's only the beginning. Taken all in all, it isn't surprising that Jack Williamson has had an asteroid named after him. What's harder to understand is why no one has proposed giving his name to an actual planet. ☘

happy with the story as it worked out."

If you want to be a science fiction writer, Williamson believes, you need to know "at least enough science to avoid errors that might break the story illusion." Taking that a step further, he says hard science works best in fiction when "it tries to work along the frontier between today's ideas and the future hardware. Space exploration was science fiction for a whole generation, the decades between Robert Goddard's Smithsonian paper in 1918 about a method for reaching 'extreme altitudes' and the German V2 rocket fired at London in the 1940s by men who had read about space rockers in science fiction. Atomic power and nuclear war were science fiction in the years between Einstein's famous quotation linking matter and energy published in 1905, and the first atomic bomb in 1945."

Williamson believes that science fiction seldom tries to teach science, although it has often led young fans into a desire to know more about that field of study.

"Sometimes science fiction does forecast the future, but only by accident. It can survey possible futures. Sometimes they happen. More often we're lucky they don't!"

Williamson said people sometimes wonder how he has been able to "stay in the game" as long as he has. "The secret, I think, is good genes, good luck, and a lively curiosity. I feel a drive to understand our whole universe, its origin and its nature and its final fate—an urge that, with a different education, might have made me a professional scientist."

Prior to the publication of "Miss Milion," his latest *AMAZING Stories* offering, Williamson's most recent piece published by this magazine was "The Ice Gods" in the Winter 1994 issue. That edition also carried a reprint of "The Cosmic Express," a Williamson short story first published in *AMAZING Stories* in December 1930.

AMAZING Stories also published Williamson's classic short novel "The Green Girl" in two parts in the March and April 1930 issues. The opening sentence of that story

has been used repeatedly as an example of how to get a reader immediately into a story.

Williamson cut right to the chase when he wrote: "At high noon on May 4, 1999, the sun went out!"

Williamson's life as a writer has seen more triumph than sorrow, and his life today is one of continuing work and contentment.

"I feel privileged to be alive today, in what I feel is a unique crisis in world history. Science is shattering old traditions, challenging old ideas, and offending those who hold them. New technologies are reshaping our lives and opening opportunities—that may never come again—to build a better world society. Yet suddenly now, armed with nuclear and biological weapons and ruled by our own electronic creations, we can blunder into the destruction of ourselves and all we have created. At ninety, I feel no personal dread of any coming global doom and it's a great age for science fiction!" ☘



MISS MILLION

BY JACK WILLIAMSON



*She's beautiful. She's rich.
And she wants to know
what makes us tick.*

ILLUSTRATION BY
TERESE NIELSEN

SHE HIT PORTALES LIKE A FALLING STAR. I met her at the Inn as I crossed the lobby to the Wednesday breakfast meeting of a few literary friends who laugh a lot and seldom mention literature. Her soprano voice overtook me.

"What is credit card?"

A slim young woman with a creamy tan and her hair in a perfect coif, a folded newspaper under her arm. She had turned from the flustered girl at the desk, waving a crisp new hundred-dollar bill. Here in Portales, where shoes and shirt are

"Assisted evolution?"

sufficiently de rigueur, she wore something with a blue iridescent shimmer that gave her the look of a Hollywood starlet on Oscar night.

Instant enchantment had taken my voice, but the manager burst out of the back office, begging her to forgive an unforgivable contretemps. Her reservation was perfectly valid. She was a most welcome guest

who would surely enjoy our friendly town.

"I called the bank." He dropped his voice for the clerk. "Miss Million's New York reference is a diamond dealer. Nothing wrong with her money."

Demurely unperturbed, she was turning to offer me a card plainly printed on an odd silvery plastic:

A. D. MILLION

1100 0101 0010 1001 0111

I stood squinting at it until she asked, "Feeding place near?"

My brain spun for several seconds before I found enough wit to ask, "You mean a restaurant? Food?"

She raised a silver-nailed hand to twist at something in her ear, seemed to listen at it, and gave me a heart-stopping smile. "Exactly. Appetite sharp."

I caught my breath again and asked her to join us for breakfast. Amazingly, she agreed. Max and Rob snapped to their feet in instant admiration when I introduced her. Margo and Trix nodded politely while they surveyed her form and her outfit and her hair.

"Cuisine?" Raising perfect eyebrows at the menu, she pushed it at me. "Can request meal?"

I ordered the All-American breakfast for both of us. Rob asked where she came from.

"Year million, more or less."

Rob loves a tall tale.

"A time traveler?" He played along without a blink. "Where's your machine?"

"No machine here," she said. "Chronoflexor transit."

"Be careful with butterflies." Grinning, Rick spoke up from the end of the table. "Harm to a gnat could erase your own future and leave you stuck right here with us."

"Risk accepted." She shrugged. "Mission significant."

"Significant?" Carefully grave, Rob mocked her language. "Can explain?"

She sipped her coffee and made a face at it.

"Temporal research." Touching the device in her ear, she tipped her head and nodded to whatever she heard. "Pushing travel envelope for fresh survey of human origins. Prime objective: collect specimen of early human DNA."

"So?" Rob set down his cup to make his show of sober interest. "Who wants DNA?"

"Engineers, of course. Genetic engineers."

"I see." He nodded as if he really did. "What will they do with it?"

"Test it." Her voice had an edge. "Exchange of DNA induces reproduction. Successful recovery of early human DNA could enrich gene pool."

"Engineered," she told him. "Engineered procreation."

"Playing God?" In spite of himself, he betrayed an instant of doubt. "You're recreating the race?"

"Humans still human," she assured him. "New proof expected from test specimen of primitive DNA."

"If you yourself are engineered..." Max grinned at her, raising his coffee cup. "Here's to genetic engineering!"

A hard look from her erased his expression. Back in the game, Rob gave her a sympathetic nod. "If you're a student of evolution, take a look at this."

He reached for her newspaper, spread it across the table, pointed to a black headline: EVOLUTIONIST DEBATES CREATION SCIENTIST. She scanned it, a finger on her translator.

"Creation science?" She looked up inquiringly. "Early genetic technology?"

"Not quite that." Rob grinned. "Doc Pharr calls it hogwash. He's our local evolutionist. A biologist out at the college. He says it's twisting science to support superstitious mythology."

"Myth of human origin! Must record." She clapped her hands in delight and closed her eyes to murmur something, perhaps to the gadget in her ear, before she turned to ask, "Fact of natural evolution still in question in this era?"

"Debated, anyhow." Rob shrugged. "A thorny question. I've got friends on both sides, but yonder there's a true believer. You might talk to him." He nodded at Tim Flynn, sitting alone at the next table. "He set up the debate."

Pastor Flynn's face had lit up when he saw Miss Million, and his eyes hardly left her while we waited for our breakfast. I caught her smiling toward him while we ate, but she kept a lively conversation going at our own table.

Margo and Trix write romance novels. She asked if they knew the Brontë sisters. Phil is a playwright; she inquired if his plays were presented at Shakespeare's Globe.

"Shakespeare's dead," he informed her. "So are the sisters."

Rob is a journalist. When she asked what he knew about the lost colony on Mars, he kept a straight face and asked if she had been there.

"Once only. Bad hotel. Virtual Mars better fun."

"No doubt."

Confidentially, she leaned to murmur at my ear. "Time frontiers unexplored. Access restricted. Facts fragmentary. Early records lost. Dates not established." She shrugged without apology. "Perils of the pioneer."

Rob looked at his watch and abandoned the game to finish his ham and eggs. Pastor Flynn was still at his table. He

Rob blinked at the idea. "Now was it assisted?"

"So you want to clone an early man?"

"Nonsense." She frowned reprovingly, as if impatient with him. "Searching for fossil remains. Early artifacts. Primitive folkways. Dawn of technology." She gestured widely. "Researching history of assisted human evolution."

"Assisted evolution?" Rob blinked at the idea but drove doggedly on. "How was it assisted?"

jumped to his feet when he saw us breaking up, waited eagerly to meet Miss Million, and asked us to join him.

"Of surety?" Her quick smile delighted him. "If discuss creation science."

I'm no creationist, but Tim has been a friend since we were in grade school together. Sometimes I'd gone with him to hear his father, an old-time fire-and-brimstone preacher. A rangy,



red-haired athlete, Tim had given up a baseball career to follow his father into the pulpit. He has the same ringing baritone and the same stern fundamentalist faith, though he tries to be a gentleman about it. Never married, he had seemed immune to women till he saw Miss Million.

He turned pink when she offered her hand, and stood gaping and speechless till she showed him the headline. That clouded his face for a moment, but he grabbed her hand and clung to it, beaming.

"Miss Million!" He whispered it like a prayer. "A most beautiful name."

She liberated her fingers. "Why debate creation?"

Staring as if he had not heard, he waved her into a chair and ordered coffee. She smiled at him, her eyes innocently wide.

"You question fact of human evolution?"

He sat dazed for half a minute, trying to compose himself.

"I respect science," He spoke with a solemn gravity, choosing his words as if in his pulpit. "Modern medicine. Computers. TV, rockets to the planets. Precious gifts that reveal the guiding grace of God. However . . ." He paused, and then his voice sharpened.

"I differ with those sneering Yankee atheists who call this the Bible Belt. I deplore their

mockery of faith and deny their Satanic cult of evolution. They attack the truth I live by. What I do believe and obey is the word of God. I seek my truth in the Holy Bible."

"Bible?" She touched the translator, seemed to wait for an answer, finally nodded. "Book of tribal fables?"

"Sacred revelations." Sternly, he echoed his father's graveyard tones. "Read Genesis about creation. God made man in His own image on the sixth day. On the seventh day, He ended His work and rested."

She leaned to ask, "You believe?"

"I'd leave the pulpit if I didn't." He slammed his hand on the table for emphasis, hard enough to rattle the cups. "I'd sell curs or go into real estate."

She shrugged and turned from him to eye a heavy woman with a big belly waddling out of the room, while an overalled farmer carried a sobbing, tow-haired tot behind her.

"Primitive horrors!" She shrank from the woman and dropped her voice for me. "Disease, genocide, pretech procreation. Ordeal of early female. Needless suffering. Life at risk. Records shocking, reality appalling."

The pastor frowned, astonished.

"That's Bells Fell. She sang in the choir till she got pregnant."

"Manner of primitive beasts." Primly, Miss Million pursed her lips. "All elegance lacking."

"Huh?" He blinked at her, bewildered. "What's wrong?"

"Learn science," she advised him. "Watch bacteria fission. Stay young forever, avoiding unpleasantness of age and death."

He gave her a baffled grunt.

"Fission?" I goggled like the pastor. "You can recreate human beings to make them fission like bacteria?"

"Not exactly." She shrugged at my amazement. "Bacterial fission complex. Human fission more complex. Transient phase required."

"How could that be?"

"Cells divide." With her eyes half closed, she fingered the translator. "New cells form mobile complexes. Migrate to separate sites. Assemble into duplicate individuals." I caught a fleeting smile at the pastor's perplexity. "Process clear?"

"Miss Million," he whispered suddenly, "you have beautiful hair."

The coffee had come but he ignored it, leaning to admire the tiny bangles on her silver bracelet. She asked to see his watch and called it a fascinating artifact. They both laughed. I left them silent at the table, Tim smiling into her eyes.

Next morning I found him there again, sitting moodily alone over his coffee in a far corner of the non-smoking section. He beckoned me to join him, rose to grip my hand, and stood blinking as if he had forgotten my name.

"God forgive me!" His voice was a stricken whisper. "I've prayed on my knees and got no answer." He gulped and tried to recover himself. "Sit down. I need a friend."

Wondering, I sat and waited.

"Miss Million," he said. His coffee splashed when he tried to

"Was it a nightmare?" He whispered

drink. He set the cup down and gave me a hard interrogative look. "How long have you known her?"

"Only since yesterday."

"I don't—don't know—" Nervously, he wiped his napkin at the spilled coffee. "I was with her last night. I—I'm afraid I don't know what happened. When I called an hour ago, she said she'd meet me here for breakfast. But I don't know . . ."

His voice trailed off. He sat for half a minute, staring blankly at nothing.

"God have mercy!" He shook his head, muttering almost to himself. "I can't blame her. Whatever happened, I was a beast. An utter beast!"

Waiting again, I wondered if she had been the winner of our little game.

"Am I crazy?" He straightened to look at me. "Do I act crazy?"

"Disturbed," I said. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"If you can help." Anxiously, he glanced toward the entrance.

"I canceled a church meeting and spent most of yesterday with her. She wanted to know the history of the town and the county and the first people here. I drove her out to the dig and the early man museum. They were closed, but she came with me to the church. She asked what it was. I tried to tell her the Bible story. She knelt to pray with me, but then she asked if I thought the earth is flat."

Trembling, he got the coffee to his lips, gulped it down, and signaled the waitress for another cup.

"I forgot myself." He shivered. "I forgot my God. When we went past the Rio Rancho, she showed me a hundred-dollar bill and wanted to eat. I didn't get what she said to the waiter, but he brought margaritas."

He shivered again, watching the waitress with his coffee.

"I can't blame her," he went on when she was gone. "The

devil got in me. I drank the margarita—my first alcohol since I came to the faith. She ordered another and wanted to dance. I don't know how, but she tried to teach me. I never—"

He stopped to gulp the hot coffee, while I wondered if she had indeed been collecting her DNA.

"Whatever happened, it was the drinks and the devil in me." He sat a long time staring at me, terror in his eyes. "It was midnight when we got back here. She was as drunk as I was, crooning something like a song in some other language. She put her arms around me and asked me into her room. God forgive me, I swear I never meant to take advantage!"

Shaking, he set down the empty cup.

"If He can—if He can forgive . . . Jesus resisted temptation, but I'm not Jesus. I forgot myself. Forgot my God. Gave in to my own Satanic lust. I damned my soul. And God has chastened me."

He sat gritting his teeth while the waitress walked by.

"Have I dug my grave? Am I damned forever?" I reached to clap his shoulder and felt him shudder. "Afterward . . . afterward, we slept. When I woke—"

the question to me, hopelessly shaking his head.

His fists clenched till I heard his knuckles crack.

"She was lying with me, naked in the bed. I reached to touch her and felt some things crawling off her body. Things that felt like ants. They crawled up my arm. That's what I thought. Or was I still drunk?"

He stopped to gaze at me, his reddened eyes mutely appealing for an answer.

"I got out of bed and tried to wake her. She didn't move. And those crawling things . . ." He sat shaking for a short time, lost in his own torment. "Swarming like ants, but bigger than ants and red as blood. What were they?"

He was in no mood to entertain any answer I knew how to give him.

"I thought they were eating her." He was whispering hoarsely. "But now I don't know. Her flesh seemed to be dissolving. Melting into them. It—it—"

He had bitten his lip; I saw a bit of blood in the corner of his mouth. He shuddered and went on. "Those red bugs! Swimming out of her blood, crawling up my arm. They clung when I tried to brush them away. Fell off when I held them toward the light. Or was I drunk and delirious?"

He dabbed his napkin at his lips.

"I just stood there and watched them consume her. Her organs. Her bare red bones. They drank her blood. Everything, till she was gone. Even her beautiful hair. The sheet was left clean."

"Or am I really crazy?" Miserably, he waited for a word of comfort I failed to find. "I turned on the lights to see if the bugs were real. They swarmed away from the light, into the closet. And left me alone in the room."

Gray-faced and shaking, he peered toward the entrance, got half to his feet, then sagged back into his chair when he saw nobody.

"Was it a nightmare?" He whispered the question to me,

hopelessly shaking his head. "I don't know, but Miss Million was gone." He groped for his empty cup and let it clatter on the table when he set it down again. "I was sick in the bathroom. I looked for her when I came out. She wasn't there. I dressed and got away."

"Got home, I don't know how. I was sick again. I prayed on my knees, prayed God to take mercy on my miserable soul. I was afraid to call the police. Afraid they would come knocking at my door."

"But they didn't," I told him. "Here you are."

"Here in my own black hell." His haunted eyes searched my face. "Stricken mad. Or maybe drunk. I walked the floor. Dozed in my chair. Dreamed about those red bugs. When day came, I woke sober enough to call the hotel. They rang her room."

Shuddering, he tried to smile.

"She answered. Alive. Laughed when I tried to say I was sorry."

"If she's okay, what's the problem?"

"Look at this."

He pushed something across the table. Her silver bracelet, with the tiny bangles.

"Lift it," he begged me. "Tell me if it's real. Or is it one more trick of Satan's?"

The bangles jingled when I picked it up.

"Real enough," I told him. "Heavy as solid silver."

"If it's real . . ." He stared at it as if it terrified him. "She wore it to bed. I remember the tinkle when she hugged me. I found it lying on the sheet after all the bugs were gone. Does it prove . . .?" He shuddered. "I'm afraid to think—"

He gasped and looked across the room. I saw Miss Million gliding toward us. She was wrapped in something like a white silk sari, and her face was the same perfect oval, but she was somehow changed. Smaller, I thought, looking younger than I recalled her, almost a child. Tim rose to greet her and then staggered back, both hands lifted to his head.

"My God!" He moaned the words. "My dear God!"

Turning, I saw that she had indeed received her specimen DNA. Her identical twin had come in behind her, smiling an eager identical smile. Their childish voices chimed together:

"Good morning, father!"



about the author

Jack Withaussen has been a contributor to the science fiction genre for seventy years. For more about this amazing writer, see page 22.

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STAR TREK
VOYAGER

when **PUSH**
comes to
SHOVE

Just another day . . . until the T'Kari transported into Janeway's world

CAPTAIN JANEWAY PAUSED, GLANCING ABOUT *Voyager's* bridge. All was calm: Tom Paris looked bored; Chakotay was lost in thought; and Tuvok was . . . Tuvok, which meant Vulcan-impassive. Harry Kim, at his station, was studying some on-screen calibrations with utter concentration—not surprising, since Seven of Nine was studying them over his shoulder and, presumably, making coldly analytical corrections.

Just another day on *Voyager*. Until . . .

"Captain!" Kim said sharply. "I'm picking up a distress signal . . . two-eight-zero mark thirty-five. One . . . ship, I guess," he added doubtfully. "It's, well, cobbled together, I'd say."

"A badly assimilated amalgam of parts," Seven agreed.

"On screen," Janeway ordered.

They all stared at the distressed ship in a moment of startled silence. Rusty, mismatched engines . . . gouges in one side patched with what looked like scrap metal. . . . Janeway's first thought was: *That can fly?* Her second was: *Not for much longer.* "Life signs?"

Kim was studying his console. "Six. . . no, seven life forms. Humanoid, oxygen-breathing, and—"

"Sensors indicate that life support is failing," Seven cut in. "The ship is venting atmosphere, and the structural integrity field has been compromised. It will collapse totally in four point three minutes." She added in cold disapproval, "Certifying what is obviously an almost derelict spacecraft as fit to fly is unproductive."

"We can discuss that later," Janeway said dryly. "Lieutenant Paris. Open a hailing frequency: U.S.S. *Voyager* to unknown vessel. Your distress signal is acknowledged. We are standing by to render assistance."

"... thanks be . . ." came the weak reply, half lost amid static. "Please . . . child . . . at least save . . ."

The transmission ended in one final burst of static.

Janeway spoke into her comm badge: "Captain to transporter room. Prepare for emergency transport from disabled ship. Seven persons. Sick Bay: Be ready to receive possible casualties. Mr. Neelix, meet me in the transporter room." Granted, *Voyager* was light-years away from "his" sector of space, but you never could tell what information Neelix might provide. Springing to her feet, Janeway added, "Chakotay, you have the conn. Tuvok, Seven, come

with me." What Neelix didn't know, a Borg might.

And never mind how she might have learned it, Janeway added to herself.

THE IMAGE OF THE DAMAGED SHIP LOOMED OVER them on a remote monitor. Janeway glanced up at it, willing, *Hold on . . . hold on . . . we've almost got you . . .*

Debris erupted from the derelict's nacelles. An instant later, Janeway winced as the ship blew apart in progressively brighter explosions and one final blinding glare.

"Did we get them?" she demanded.

Lieutenant Warren, a stocky, competent man, was at the console, his fair-skinned face red with concentration. "Signal's trying to break up . . . no, you don't . . . I'm reinforcing it . . . yes! Got them!"

Six . . . no, all seven figures were forming: The smallest, presumably the child, was clinging so tightly to an adult that it was almost hidden.

An adult *what*, though? The refugees were light-boned, almost birdlike in appearance, their narrow faces triangular, with high, prominent cheekbones beneath bright, dark eyes. They were also, understandably, disheveled and stained with ash, oil, and grime from their destroyed ship. Long, unruly crests of hair flowed down their backs in unruly tangles of blacks, browns, and bronzes, and their gauzy robes, almost as gaudy as Neelix's outfits and even more colorful under the stains, looked downright bedraggled.

But they're all alive, and apparently unburt.

They were fully alert, too. Those bright glances flicked from Janeway to Tuvok to—

Ah, yes, here came Neelix now, hurrying into the room, shedding a chef's apron as he came. As he saw the new arrivals, he stopped dead with a laugh of sheer delight. "By the Great Tree, this is wonderful! Never would have expected to see any of you folks this far out of your range, but—just wonderful! Captain, our guests are none other than T'Kari!"

"Yes," one of the refugees agreed in a clear tenor, smiling an almost human smile. "We are T'Kari." He blinked. "Captain?"

Hearing her title, the T'Kari surged forward, all of them delightedly chirping:

"Captain!"



"You are the one who spoke to us!"

"You saved us!"

"We are happy, grateful, yes!"

It was difficult to be alarmed by the fluttering lot, particularly since Janeway was a full head taller than any of them. And their near-hysteria was understandable: They'd just been snatched from death.

"Wait a minute," Janeway said, raising a hand. The T'kari obediently froze. "I am Captain Kathryn Janeway of the U.S.S. *Voyager*, and you are welcome on board. You are... Mr. Neelix called you T'kari. What and who are T'kari?"

Neelix's smile widened, and he almost danced with delight. "They're nomads, Captain, truly splendid musicians and entertainers who live on board their ships. Though, usually, the ships are in, well, better repair than that one was."

The T'kari who had first spoken, the tenor—a male!—said, "True enough, true enough. But that poor thing was the only refuge we could find. And yes, Captain Janeway, we are performers."

Sure enough, he had a stringed instrument slung over his shoulder, while another T'kari had a small, long-stemmed drum. A lighter-boned... female?... carried a framework of tiny bells that tinkled faintly as she moved.

"And look," Neelix exclaimed, "that one, the elder"—he dipped his head in quick courtesy—"the elder actually has a Destiny Tarot."

The elder, a T'kari woman in filmy layers of red and violet robes, carried a battered deck of cards on which a gold symbol blazed.

Seven of Nine moved to Janeway's side. "Species 7509," she pronounced the newcomers. "Extreme manual dexterity and speed compensate for this species' relative physical frailty. They have vestigial telepathic abilities. We added their distinctiveness to our diversity and found ourselves even more efficient at micromanipulations."

Instead of the horror Janeway expected, the T'kari seemed... amazed.

"A pet Borg?"

"You have separated one out from the collective?"

"You have tamed a Borg?"

Genuine wonder? Or an oblique way of insulting Seven? Either way, she merely watched, expression unchanged. Janeway explained gently, "She is not a pet or a captive. Seven of Nine is a valuable member of our crew."

"Is it so? Is it so?" The elder's voice was deeper than Janeway had expected, a true alto. "Most amazing. But do not mistake what your valuable Borg says. We are not thieves!"

"We are the T'kari," the tenor added. "Which means, though we wander, we have honor. This is Inarra, and I am Andral."

The others added their introductions: Ekta, a soprano

carrying a harp, Lirik, a baritone with what looked much like a lute, Eloan and Kalora, sopranos and pipers, all T'kari adults, though Eloan looked to be barely out of adolescence.

Where's the child? There she is, still hiding behind them. Why haven't they introduced her? Custom? Or just giving the poor little thing a chance to catch her breath?

"We are singers, sojourners, dwellers on the paths between the worlds," Andral continued. "We can repair what is broken..."

"Apparently, Captain, this did not extend to their ship," Tuvok commented.

Inarra's bright, disapproving glance flicked to him. "A cook-unit, a zither with a snapped bridge, a ripped cloak.

Those we can repair. A broken ship..." She gave an odd little twist of a shoulder: a T'kari shrug. "Such are in the hands of Destiny—which we can read, Captain, but which squirms away even from us at times."

"I see. And what," Janeway wondered aloud, "are we to do with you?"

"Three stars away," Andral said hopelessly, "is the world Avon-aram with its markets. You will surely find fresh supplies for your ship there. And if you take us there, we will be able to make a living, put a little away for another ship—one not so old as our lost *Eyrie*."

"Avon-aram?" Janeway asked Neelix, who shook his head. "I'm sorry, but you'll have to describe this world and its star system. Give us the coordinates if you can."

"We will try," Andral said uncertainly. The T'kari moved together, touching hands, eyes shut in sudden, intense concentration. Janeway blinked as an image of a planetary system formed in her mind: a yellow star, so like Earth's own sun that it was jarring to count only seven worlds about it. No, it was not home—but she suddenly knew how to get there.

And just as suddenly, the image was gone. The T'kari swayed and staggered, clinging to each other to keep from falling, clearly drained. "We have... only the faintest... of telepathic talents," Andral panted, clearly embarrassed. "Vestigial... yes. Once, stories say, our people had greater powers. Now..." He gave that twist of a shrug.

"Even vestigial telepathic powers may still be dangerous," Tuvok reminded Janeway.

Not in this case, she thought. That was no feigned exhaustion. And so much work just to give me a star chart—no. They'd kill themselves before they could work any harm. But she'd have the Doctor examine them thoroughly, just in case. "Neelix knows about these people, or thinks he does. Besides," she added with a quick little grin, "Neelix has been pestering us about fresh supplies."

Activating her combadge, she said, "Janeway to Sick Bay: Prepare to receive seven visitors." Cutting off the Doctor's predictable huff of outrage at being deprived of Tom

Instead of the horror Janeway expected, the T'kari seemed... amazed.
"A pet Borg!"
"You have separated one out from the collective!"
"You have tamed a Borg!"

Paris's services as nurse "while the man is playing pilot," Janeway contacted Paris next.

"Tom, lay in a course for Avan-aram on the following heading: 79X Mark 35. Warp factor two."

"Aye, aye."

"We shall not trespass on your hospitality long," said Inarra with a sharp glance at Tuvok.

Andal nodded. "And while we're aboard, we shall offer our thanks by performing for you and your crew. Is that acceptable?"

Neelix was grinning so broadly and nodded so vehemently that Janeway nearly laughed. "It is highly acceptable. Seven, now you'll have a chance to hear some live music aside from Ensign Kim's clarinet—"

But Seven of Nine, her face utterly unreadable, had moved to study the child, who had come out of hiding to stare up at Seven. Was this truly another T'kari? Some genetic throwback to an earlier type, perhaps, or a child of a closely related species. It . . . she . . . was darker-skinned than the others, so light-boned that she seemed almost fragile. A long, toasted crest of black hair flowed over a crimson jacket and skirt that exposed bony wrists and ankles. Her triangular little face, with its huge dark eyes, was far too solemn for someone of her age . . . whatever that was. Ten, Janeway hazarded, at most.

And Seven, to Janeway's utter bemusement, sank to one knee to study the child more closely. For a long moment, neither moved, equally fascinated.

"Her name is Lari," Andal murmured to Janeway, his eyes gentle. "At least we think that's her name."

"We found the girl, lost and alone, crying with hunger in a marketplace," Inarra added. "She could tell us nothing of herself or her family, but she is clearly T'kari-kin. Besides . . . we could not leave the little one to starve."

"The entire troupe adopted her," Andal continued tenderly. "And we are raising her as best we can."

The child, Lari, brought up a wary hand to touch the implant on Seven's face.

Seven shied away, springing back to her feet. As though struggling to return to proper Borg coldness, she said to Janeway, "Although the child seems to be of the same or a closely related species, Captain, the Collective has no additional knowledge."

That was no Borg analysis you were making, Janeway thought. What just happened? Were you . . . remembering Anikka?

Neelix was kneeling beside the child now, murmuring something cheerful to her to make her smile. She gave the softest of giggles, but her gaze stayed on Seven.

Poor little thing, Janeway thought. You've been through too much for a child so young.

"The protective impulse you are all manifesting," Tuvok said in his most scholarly Vulcan tone, "is an example of neoteny, the attraction toward the very young, and part of a species' survival instinct."

But that observation, Janeway noticed, didn't stop him

from moving to Neelix's side and holding up a hand to the child, his fingers parted in the Vulcan greeting. "Live long and prosper, Lari the Wanderer."

The child gave a tiny laugh of delight, trying to make her fingers match Tuvok's. She succeeded, and the Vulcan's dark face seemed to gentle.

"I'd say neoteny seems to be part of the Vulcan psyche too," Janeway noted. Did Tuvok see in this waif some echo of the family he had not seen for so long and the grandchild he had never met?

After one last smile at Tuvok, Lari returned to studying Seven—who was clearly growing disconcerted by the child's interest.

The Doctor was trying to contact Janeway. She activated her commbadge in time to hear him snap, "Captain, I don't know what you're doing, but may I suggest that the best time to interrogate these people is *after* I have run them through Sick Bay? Perhaps you could have them sent here—and perhaps you could also send Mr. Paris to help me!"

"I'll take your request under advisement, Doctor," Janeway said carefully, refusing to laugh. "You are *Voyager's* guests," she told the T'kari. "I'm sending you to Sick Bay—no, no, just to be sure none of you are injured. Regulations," she added, and saw the T'kari sigh in resignation. "You won't be harmed, my word on it. Tuvok, if you would see that they are properly escorted? And Mr. Neelix, please accompany them."

So far, so good. But as Janeway left the transporter room, Seven followed more slowly.

What memories did that child spark in you? Janeway wondered. Can you be remembering Anikka Hansen? Are you remembering being . . . merely a human child?

She knew that if she asked, Seven would not respond. And, Janeway mused, it was just possible that Seven didn't know the answers, either.

Ah, well, back to the bridge. Sitting in her command chair, Janeway was about to add to that suddenly interrupted log when the Doctor sent her an acerbic message.

"Our visitors are exactly what they seem: a group of frightened, weary humanoids, avian subgrouping 104.54, no hazardous materials, no infectious diseases, nothing worse than a few minor contusions."

"Have you tested for—"

"Yes, Captain." The Doctor sounded even more put-upon than usual. *"They do, indeed, have vestigial telepathic abilities, not enough to bend a spoon. Though why one should want to—"*

He was interrupted by a spurt of music. Very nice music, it seemed, too, Janeway thought. Flute and harp, was that?

"There they go again! Captain, please, would you get these . . . these musicians out of Sick Bay and on stage where they belong?"

Janeway grinned. "Gladly, Doctor. Gladly."

SEVEN OF NINE, TERTIARY ADJUNCT OF UNIMATRIX Zero-One, stood in her alcove. The vital flows of current restored her body, implants, and nanites, while the hum of the

Collective rose about her. In alcoves all around her rested similar drones, while others went about their appointed tasks, guided by the Collective and the song of the Borg Queen.

Resistance was futile. Resistance was superfluous.

That was the way of it. . . .

Or was it?

Loop. Restart.

Seven stood in her alcove in a cargo bay of *Voyager*. Physically ingested nutrients had restored her body; now, the current restored the eighteen percent of her that remained Borg. She no longer heard the song of the Collective, but the myriad sounds of a starship controlled by individuals as it traveled through deep space.

Her home had always been a ship, a ship populated by drones/a ship guided by a tall man, a laughing woman, with fair hair and blue eyes like her own/a ship commanded by a woman as formidable as the Borg Queen, who spoke to her and held out her hand.

"Seven. Annika. Time to come out."

Seven of Nine turned obediently, leaving the refuge of her alcove.

The T'kari waif called Lari was watching her. Confused for a moment at what was patent reality yet was at the same time impossible, Seven met the child's unblinking stare in what Ensign Kim called a glare, an expression one used when one wished to be left alone. "Cargo bay is no place for a child."

The "glare" failed to work.

"You were like me once," Lari said. "All alone like me."

"I had the Collective," Seven retorted. "You are merely alone." She suppressed the impulse to retreat into her alcove. Irrelevant. Nonfunctional.

"I hear the songs of my clan," the child countered.

"I will take you back to them. Now." She had learned that tone of finality from the Captain.

Seven felt the child's warm little hand unexpectedly close about her own, and nearly pulled free in shock. But . . . the child was lost . . . alone. . . . *I must return her to her adopted people.*

She came back to reality with a shock, wondering why she had not already asked the most important question. "How did you enter the cargo bay? I secured it before I entered my alcove. You would have needed to pass through several other secure areas as well. How?"

"I pushed," Lari said simply.

"That does not make sense. There is nothing to push."

"I pushed," Lari repeated.

The child sounded weary. For a bewildering moment, Seven felt an urge to pick the girl up and carry her—the tall man cried "Fire, Annika!" and running her up, up, up to the sky before carrying her off to her bed with the bird-mobile over it. Ravens, just like their ship. . . .

Ridiculous. She was Seven of Nine. She was Borg. She

would return the child to her people, then consult with Captain Janeway.

They left the turbolift on Deck Six, where the T'kari had been lodged. But the turbolift doors had scarcely closed behind them when Seven saw one of the T'kari females—Eloan, the adolescent—hammering frantically on a door. "Inarra! Inarra! She's done it again!"

"Uh oh," whispered Lari. She tried to back away, but Seven tightened her grip on the girl's hand.

The door slid open, and Inarra's voice said tersely, "She will return soon. She always does. Return to your quarters, Eloan. They must not know."

What? What must we not know?

"Yes, Elder," the girl murmured.

The doors slid shut again.

I must contact Captain Janeway.

Turning to Lari, she said, "You will come with me, please."

The child wriggled her hand free and backed away, wide-eyed, around the bend of the corridor.

"I will not injure you," Seven said, wondering if the oddness she was feeling could possibly be . . . impatience, "but you must come with me."

Lari could not get very far. Seven followed the child around the curve of the corridor . . .

. . . and found no one there.

Janeway would be going off duty in . . . precisely seven minutes. Seven touched her commbadge.

"Captain, this is Seven of Nine."

"Seven? What's wrong?"

"Captain, I am on Deck Six. While there is no immediate peril, I have discovered . . . a matter here we must discuss. Please."

She made certain to use the verbal marker "please" so that the Captain would know that she did not attempt to usurp her command. There was a hint of a sigh from Janeway—who, being only human, had most probably been looking forward to going off duty. *"Very well, Seven. Meet me in my ready room."*

More racing footsteps—Eloan again, hammering on Inarra's door. "She's back!" Eloan's relief was evident, even to a Borg.

"Good." Inarra's voice was even more terse than before. "Now go back, quickly, before they find you running about like a summer-crazed idiot! Try to sleep."

As Seven entered the ready room, she found a bemused and wary Janeway waiting.

"What is it, Seven?"

"I found the T'kari child near my alcove, which is a secure area, one for which, of course, she has not been authorized. She did not explain how she came to be there beyond saying that she 'pushed.' When I returned her to Deck Six, I overheard the other T'kari discussing her absence—and the

Seven felt the child's warm little hand unexpectedly close about her own, and nearly pulled free in shock. But the child was lost . . . alone. . . . *I must return her to her adopted people.*

need to conceal it from you. Almost immediately after that, the child . . . disappeared. I can only surmise that she 'pushed' again."

Janeway's raised brow meant, Seven knew by now, both annoyance and curiosity: "Thank you, Seven." Into her combridge she said, "T'vok, have our T'kari visitors brought to my ready room, if you would."

"At once, Captain."

The Captain's smile, Seven thought, was not a friendly thing.

JANEWAY GLANCED ABOUT THE READY ROOM. Seven pairs of bright, alien eyes, as well as Seven's blue gaze, just as bright and almost as alien, stared back.

"People, I know you've been through a good deal of stress lately. And I know we're all weary. But I need some answers, and I need them now."

Andal glanced at the other T'kari. "Anything, Captain."

"Seven here says that she found Lari in a secure area. The child could not have gotten in there by any normal means. And before you suggest it," she added, seeing the glint in Andar's eyes, "none of my crew would have let her in there."

Janeway caught several quick, startled glances, birdlike little tilts of the head, T'kari to T'kari, but no one spoke. After a carefully timed pause, she continued, "And when Seven tried to return her to you, the child simply disappeared. Does that strike a chord with any of you? Yes? So, apparently, this isn't the first time that she's gone missing like this, either. Is it?"

Silence. Nervous glances.

All right, go for the weakest member of the flock. Janeway turned to the child, who flinched, staring up at her with wide, frightened eyes, "Lari, nobody's going to hurt you," she said. "But Seven says she saw you outside her alcove. When she asked how you got there, you said that you pushed. What did you mean by that?"

"Nothing. . . ." It was barely audible.

Janeway stifled a sigh. "No one's accusing you of anything bad, Lari. But a starship is no place for a little girl to run about unaccompanied. And if you're sleepwalking, the Doctor needs to know about it."

Sleepwalking? Janeway's mind echoed wryly. *Through solid walls?*

Enough.

"Lari, all of you," Janeway snapped. "You owe me your lives. And I'm calling in the debt right now. If you wish us to take you to Avan-aram, I need a full explanation. Now."

Sighs. Shrugs. Then Inarra began tentatively, "We mean you and your ship no harm, our honor on it."

"Go on."

Inarra glanced at Andar. He continued, "Your crewmember has called us vestigial telepaths. You have seen the truth of that. And you have heard me say that once we were more than we are now."

He paused, and Inarra took up the story again. "We found Lari alone as we said, and took her in. Among the

T'kari, all are family. But we soon realized that she is of an older blood than we. And in her, some of the . . . ancient gift still runs strong."

"You don't seem precisely thrilled about that," Janeway said.

The T'kari glanced at each other yet again, more of those quick little birdlike movements. Inarra laughed softly. "It is not a gift without a sharp edge, a . . ." She held up a helpless hand.

"Mixed blessing?" Janeway suggested.

"Yes! Indeed! Most poetic phrasing. A 'mixed blessing.' T'kari gifts illumine our lives, but they are, truly, a 'mixed blessing,' since they also sometimes cause people to fear us, to turn on us or even seek to enslave us. When the gift is very strong, as Lari's is, it becomes a threat and a lure. My grandchild-of-the-heart does not read hearts and minds, but she has the power to move . . . to move herself."

"Teleportation?" Janeway exclaimed. "A natural teleporter?"

"Indeed, that. When we first adopted her, the gift was weak, only enough to let her evade us when she did not wish her face washed. Now, though, as she is growing stronger . . ."

Lari had "pushed" from Deck Six to Seven's alcove, Janeway thought. An older Lari, fully grown, fully trained . . .

The lights in the ready room suddenly flashed red/off, red/off, and the warning siren shrilled. *Oh, bell* Janeway thought, and hit her combridge. "Chakotay! What's going on?"

"We've been hailed by a ship of a sort I've never seen before. They want to talk with the captain. And they've brought their weapons online."

"On my way, Janeway out." She leaped to her feet, a hand stabbing at Andar and Inarra. "You two, come with me. And you, too, Seven. The rest of you, stay here!"

A quick call to Security ensured that they would obey.

AS JANEWAY STEPPED ONTO THE BRIDGE, SHE glanced at the viewscreen. Oh, yes, the ship hanging there in space was undeniably built for war. Ugly as the proverbial sin, it bristled with gunports. It had seen hard use, and probably could have taken something as small as the T'kari ship with no trouble at all. But something as large and powerful as *Voyager* . . . well now, that would be another matter.

Don't underestimate them, Janeway warned herself.

Chakotay rose, relinquishing the command chair.

"As far as I can tell from what little they would admit to someone who wasn't the captain, they call themselves Morak."

"Species 7611," Seven cut in coldly. "A warrior race of rigid determination but little imaginative scope. We added their unyielding strength to our diversity."

"Ah . . . thank you, Seven," Chakotay said. "Their ship emerged from"—he gestured at the screen—"that asteroid belt, between us and Avan-aram."

Janeway bit back a sigh. "And let me guess: They're not

here to discuss anything as simple as right-of-way."

Chakotay gave her a wry grin. "I couldn't tell you what they want, since they refuse to talk to—"

"Anyone but the captain. Very well, let's see what they have to say. Open a hailing frequency," she ordered. As an image formed on the viewscreen, Janeway said, "To the Morak ship: You wished to speak to the captain? Well... here I am. I am Kathryn Janeway, captain of U.S.S. *Voyager*."

The image resolved into a bridge much smaller and shabbier than *Voyager's*, and focused on three humanoid figures seated in worn, uncomfortable-looking chairs. They wore dulled metal helmets, bulky sidearms, and uniforms of a drab gray-green that Janeway thought looked as old and uncomfortable as the chairs. The image was sharp enough to let her see where harness and military insignia had been fastened over painstaking repairs.

Not quite as well equipped as we'd like to be, are we? That didn't mean they wouldn't be fierce or possibly even irrational, judging from what Seven had said about "little imaginative scope."

"Do you fear to show your faces like honorable warriors?" Janeway challenged.

The Morak in the center seat raised pale, seven-fingered hands to remove its—no, his—helmet, revealing an equally pallid face, thin-lipped, with a nose that was little more than a narrow ridge between slit-pupiled indigo eyes.

"*Voyager*-Captain." He dipped his head in what Janeway assumed was captain-to-captain courtesy. "What do you in this system?"

"We're on our way home," Janeway replied. "After dropping off some friends in a safe place."

"Ahhhhh." It was as much a hiss as a sigh. "You have a fine ship. It would be sinful to destroy it."

"I am gratified to hear that," Janeway said dryly. "I assure you, we have no quarrel with the Morak, nor will we be stopping in this system for longer than it takes to drop off our friends. Will you let us pass?"

"Regrettably, *Voyager*-Captain, I cannot. Your ship carries T'kari. They are a shiftless, impious lot. But... we have uses for them."

"The T'kari are our guests," Janeway countered.

"Ahhhh, is it so? I will come to an agreement with you, *Voyager*-Captain. The Morak are not unreasonable. If you have a use for jugglers and petty thieves, very well, keep them. But they have with them a child, an innocent who must not be allowed to be tainted by impiety. Give her to us, and leave in peace. Fail," he added without the slightest change in tone or expression, "and we will blow you out of space."

"We will... consider it. End transmission."

As the screen went dark, Janeway turned to glare at Andral and Inarra. "Why are the Morak after you?"

Andral winced. "The Morak have a... rigid society. They consider our wanderings from world to world as improper, our songs and stories as sacrilegious. Above all, they distrust our gifts."

"That little exchange I just had with the Morak was about more than distrust. Am I correct in suspecting they know what Lari can do?"

The T'kari exchanged quick, sharp glances. "Unfortunately, yes," Andral admitted reluctantly. "A Morak spy saw her once, when she wasn't being careful, and reported to his superiors. All of a sudden, our poor powers became 'military assets.' The Morak tried to—*to buy* Lari from us, and when we refused—"

Inarra hid a calming hand on the man's arm. "Captain, this one Morak vessel has been tracking us from world to world. We fought to escape. We even drove our poor ship to destruction in the effort! We... dared think that we finally *had* escaped. But now..." She gave a sad little shrug.

"And this is the whole truth?" Janeway asked, staring into Inarra's eyes. "There aren't going to be any more surprises?"

Inarra met her stare steadily, despair plain on her face. "None. Captain, understand: We feared. We did not know you or your kind. Yes, you rescued us. But we did not know if, once you learned of Lari's gift and the pursuit—we did not know if you would not simply toss us into space." She sagged wearily.

"Do as you must. Only... they must not harm Lari."

I'm willing to bet that this time every word was open truth. And damned if I'm going to surrender a child to anyone who throws words like "impiety" about so casually!

Janeway turned back to the viewscreen. "Open a hailing frequency. To the Morak ship: Hear my decision. The T'kari are under our protection. We will not betray them."

"*Voyager*-Captain, I am disappointed at such impiety. One last chance: Hand over that child to us, and we shall not bar your way. Else, we shall regret your deaths."

"No!" With a rush of displaced air, Lari was there on the bridge, staring at the viewscreen in horror. She darted toward the turbolift, then turned at bay, as if realizing that she could hide nowhere on *Voyager* without jeopardizing it.

"You're Captain Arwag—I know you are!" she screamed at the viewscreen. "I saw what you did on Gwanan Three. But I won't let you hurt my family, my—my friends! I won't, I won't, I won't!"

With a new rush of air, Lari disappeared.

Janeway hastily broke off communications with the Morak. "Ensign Kim?"

"I think... yes! I've got a fix on Lari's vital signs. Apparently, she pushed onto the moon of the fourth planet out, the big one just beyond the asteroid belt. Lucky for her, it has decent gravity and atmosphere."

Inarra pressed her palms together. "She has never pushed

Janeway turned back to the viewscreen. "Open a hailing frequency. To the Morak ship: Hear my decision. The T'kari are under our protection. We will not betray them."

that far, Captain. Is she well?"

"Life signs are strong," Kim answered. "But there's a lot of seismic activity on that moon."

"I must deplore attributing Lari's choice of habitable world to 'luck,' Ensign Kim," Tuvok said. "I would hypothesize that the child's ability to teleport herself must be, of necessity, linked to her instinct for survival. The child 'sees' that she will arrive in an environment capable of sustaining life."

"The Morak ship has begun to move toward the planet's satellite," Seven's voice cut in.

Damnation. "Tuvok! We'll move to a high orbit around the moon and beam a rescue team down to locate Lari before the Morak can find her. Take—"

"Me!" Andral pleaded, and Janeway nodded. A familiar face would be important for Lari to see.

"Captain," Seven cut in, "I must be included as well."

Empathy for a lost little girl? Or merely Borg policy, to leave no drone unrescued as long as rescue was possible?

"Consider yourself volunteered, Seven. Report to the transporter room."

UNFORTUNATE, SEVEN THOUGHT AS THE TRANSPORTER effect dissipated from about the rescue party and they saw their surroundings. This was a world of looming cliffs and narrow canyons striated in black, bronze, and rose and glittering with bits of crystal. The cliff walls were pitted by countless holes suggesting a network of caves and tunnels. The complex geology would make finding the child that much more difficult.

However, it will also make it that much more difficult for the Morak to land a shuttle.

The seismic instability Seven's instruments had detected were, to her Collective-trained mind, a greater hazard than the Morak. After all, one could neither kill nor assimilate a quake.

Ensign Kebran, studying her instruments frantically, complained, "Stale! All those crystals..."

"Keep searching," Tuvok told her.

The ground shook, sending pebbles rattling down the sharp slopes, then abruptly stilled.

"Prudence," Tuvok said with Vulcan calm, "would dictate standing away from the cliffs."

Another tremor shook the ground, stronger this time. A boulder came crashing down, showering them all with rock splinters.

Andral groaned. "It feels as though this moon is building up for a big quake. If Lari's hiding in one of those caves..."

The anguish in his voice... "Get underneath the desk, Annelis, *bide*," said the tall man. "I won't let them hurt you." Seven blocked the unwelcome flash of memory. "Lari's ability to teleport will enable her to escape."

"Not if she's hit on the head, or—"

"Commander!" Ensign Kebran said suddenly. "I'm showing life signs at zero-three-fifty mark five. Over there!"

"Lari!" Andral gasped, and started forward. Seven tackled

him, and they both crashed to the ground—as an energy beam sizzled by where they'd been a moment before: too near a miss.

"That was not Lari," Tuvok said laconically as the team dove for cover.

"The Morak!" Andral cried. "If they have her..."

"They would have no need to shoot at us," Seven finished.

"We don't know that! Let me go!"

Light-boned though he was, Andral was frantic enough to tear free and run—only to cry out as a second beam struck him. As he crumpled, Seven, bent double to avoid presenting a target, raced after him.

"Get him into cover!" Tuvok shouted at her. She saw the rock he was pointing at, shouldered Andral, and ran for it.

"A flash burn," she called to Tuvok after a quick examination of the T'kari. "Not fatal."

The chief risk would be shock, so Seven pulled off her jacket and wrapped it around the half-conscious Andral to keep him warm, trying not to jolt his wound.

Could he hear her? Not certain why she should feel it necessary, Seven told him, "We will bring her home." Then, she remembered the magic words, the ones her father had almost never used, but meant every time he said them. "I promise," she added.

Seven touched her commbadge, about to order that Andral be beamed up to Sick Bay—

She heard nothing but static.

"TROUBLE, CAPTAIN," TOM PARIS SAID SUDDENLY. "The Morak are opening their gunports."

They can't possibly believe they can take us. But Seven had also said something about "rigid determination." *Translate that as "pigheadedness,"* Janeway thought. But that didn't mean the Morak might not do some damage. And with an away team on that moon, it was a risk she couldn't afford to take.

"Red alert," Janeway ordered. "Shields up. Open a hailing frequency," she added. "Let's see if we can't keep them talking... ah, yes. Captain Janeway to Morak captain... Arwaig, is it? No answer. 'Janeway to Morak captain: I know you're receiving. I also know that for you to fire on *Feyager* would be a bad mistake on your part.' No answer. 'Come now, Captain, think about this. Let us talk about the relative size and strength of our ships, shall we?'"

"They're firing!" Paris cut in.

"I'll take that as a 'no.'"

Feyager rocked slightly as a bolt of orange energy dissipated against its deflector shields.

"Shields holding, Captain."

"No damage, Captain."

Wonderful, just wonderful. The Morak look like uninspired fighters, but stubborn enough. Still, we can take anything that ship throws at us. We're safe enough—unless this Captain Arwaig calls in reinforcements. We could blow him out of space, but I'm not about to commit murder, or risk my own people.

I already have enough of my own people at risk. While we

have shields raised, our away team is trapped down there—alone with the Morak.

TUVOK LISTENED INTENTLY TO THE MESSAGE crackling from his combadge, then said, "I could not receive a clear signal. But it would seem that the Morak have begun firing upon *Voyager*."

Andal stirred weakly. "It's our fault," he moaned. "Your poor ship . . . and how many of your people have those murdering thieves killed?"

"I assure you, *Voyager* finds the Morak less intimidating than you do. And," Tuvok added, looking about sharply, "less formidable than we will find an armed landing party. The ship will have raised deflector shields, and until it can safely lower them, we cannot expect to return."

"Then we must act on our own," Seven said.

She slipped around the base of the rock toward Easign Kelvan's shelter, checking the tricorder reading against the cliffs, which were pockmarked by caves. Third cliff to the left, two levels up—or the mountaintop equivalent thereof—almost like a hive of the Collective, Seven thought. Challenging enough for a frightened child to climb and consider herself safe: Simple enough for Seven to follow. Simpler still if she need not concern herself with quakes and Morak fire.

Something stirred within the cave and moved forward. Seven saw a flash of red. Lari!

"She is attempting to climb down."

A blaze of blue-white fire struck the cliff. Seven looked away, her Borg vision recalibrating itself. To her bewilderment, her heart was racing. When she looked back, the impact zone glittered, fused to glass by the Morak energy beams.

"Lari . . . ?" Seven searched the cliff. "There! She is crouching in the mouth of the cave."

"Apparently," Tuvok observed, "the Morak have decided that if they cannot have Lari, no one can."

"Unacceptable," Seven snapped.

There was no point in asking permission of Tuvok that he would not grant. She had been wise to shed the cumbersome jacket. She could run much more efficiently without it.

Behind her, Seven heard Tuvok shout, "Keep firing! Cover her!" She lunged forward, crouching, darting from rock to rock, then hurled herself at the cliff face. Finding footholds and handholds by touch and fierce will, Seven forced herself up and up again, Morak fire blazing and crackling about her. Suddenly her hands were closing about the lip of the cave, and she pulled herself inside, pouncing on Lari and pushing the girl away from the cave's mouth.

Nothing happened, other than Lari's inexplicably choosing to throw both arms about her and cling. Inexplicable, yet . . . not unpleasant.

For now, Seven decided, they were safe.

Then the ground shook, and she revised her opinion. Rocks crashed down from the roof of the cave, and Seven bunched over Lari to protect her, grunting at the impact as

she was pelted with stones. The tremor ended, and she straightened, doing a quick self-examination.

"Are you all right?" Lari's voice was shrill with fright.

"Yes. Contusions and scrapes, no serious damage. But it is only a matter of time," Seven said, "until this cave becomes more dangerous than the Morak."

"But you shouldn't be here! It's my fault they want to hurt you!"

"If we remain here, the issue of blame will become irrelevant. Lari, can you push us back to Commander Tuvok? Or push yourself back to the ship?" Once the child was out of danger, *Voyager's* crew could efficiently defeat the Morak.

Lari squeezed her eyes shut until her face contorted.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, you're too big! And there's a . . . a wall blocking me from the ship."

The child's talents clearly did not yet extend to more than her own body mass. And clearly, they were impeded by *Voyager's* deflector shields.

The ground trembled again, and a crystal crashed down from the cave's ceiling like a glass knife, sending sharp slivers flying.

But . . . a crystal. . . A sudden surge of Borg knowledge told her that crystals were natural resonators. Did immense crystals like these have immense natural resonating capacity to match? Quickly, Seven activated her tricorder, scanning with Borg swiftness. . . .

"They're coming!" That was Tuvok's voice, echoing up among the cliffs.

The resonance should be strong enough. Barely.

"Come, back in here, Lari. Where the crystals are most densely concentrated."

"They'll break! They'll cut us!"

"We must take the risk. I need you to push now, as hard as you can. Push for both of us. The crystals will focus and intensify your strength, and let you break through the wall you felt."

Seven heard scurrying one cave-level below them: The Morak were climbing.

"Hold fast to me," Seven ordered. "Very well now. *Push!*"

The ground shook beneath them. "I can't!" Lari wailed.

"You can," Seven insisted. "Fear is irrelevant. *Push!*"

"You don't understand! You don't understand anything!"

"Do you want the Morak to catch us?"

"No! No-o-o-o!"

The cave shook. All about her, crystals snapped and shattered, a world of shining, dazzling light—

—nothing—

And then there was . . . *Voyager*.

The gleaming walls of *Voyager's* bridge surrounded them. All around them, people were crying out in astonishment.

Beside Seven, Lari struggled to her feet, staggering. But then the child froze, face white with horror and exhaustion, staring at the Morak ship on the viewscreen, staring at the energy blazing from its weapons. "No, no, no!" she screamed at the Morak. "I don't want any more of this. Go home! Just—go home!"

The Morak ship shot away as though at top warp speed, almost instantly shrinking to a dot on the viewscreen.

"What the hell..." Paris breathed.

"Captain..." Kim stopped, then tried again. "I don't know how she did it, but... the Morak are out of range. *Well out of range.*"

With the softest of sighs, Lari collapsed.

"Doctor to the bridge," ordered Janeway. "Stand down from red alert. Transporter room: Four to beam up."

THE DOCTOR SHOOK HIS HEAD, HIS MOST DISAPPROVING frown on his face. "Captain, I really must protest the way everyone in this Sick Bay seems determined to suffocate my young patient."

"Sorry, Doctor."

Janeway took a step back and bumped into Seven of Nine, who had dismissed suggestions that she might need to regenerate in her alcove. Seated on a biobed, favoring his shoulder, was Andral, watching his adopted daughter's face as she slept. Elder Inarra shuffled her Destiny Tarot from hand to hand, while the other T'kari crowded in behind her.

Relenting ever so slightly, the Doctor added, "Children of all species are amazingly resilient. Lari just needed to have her sleep. But now that we're in orbit around Avan-aram, I suppose no harm will be done if I wake her."

Janeway heard the hiss of a restorative, then the whimper of a child awakened too early.

"It's all right, Lari," she soothed. "You're among friends."

"Among family," Elder Inarra said firmly.

Lari looked warily about, sat up, then hurled herself from the bed like a small meteor, hugging Janeway, Andral, Inarra, even the stunned Seven.

Inarra sighed. "I suppose every family has a member who is both valuable and a menace."

"Your fears are baseless," Seven said. "Lari will assimilate her gift properly with time."

Will she? Janeway wondered, and moved to Lari's side, kneeling beside her. "Lari, we need to talk about something."

"My... my gift."

"Exactly. It isn't always easy growing up, and it isn't always easy to remember to do the right thing. But you can do something most people can't. You'll always have to think before you use it, and be careful to use it only to help people."

Lari winced. "I... I know. I was mad enough to push the Morak ship into the sun. But I... well... I could hear them before I pushed. They were *scared*. I—I couldn't hurt them after that." She paused. "Do you hear them being scared when you fire the ship's weapons?"

Janeway looked into the child's eyes. They were much too wise for such a little girl.

"Every time," she said. "Every time." She took a deep breath. "Keep thinking like that, and you're definitely on the right track."

Janeway got to her feet. "Now, everyone," she said, "Elder Inarra says that you're all going to sing for us. I, for one, have been looking forward to this!"

JANEWAY AND SEVEN STOOD ON THE OBSERVATION deck watching the Avan-aram system recede.

Janeway grinned. "You enjoyed the performance, didn't you, Seven?"

"The level of energy expenditure focused solely on entertainment is irrational."

"Really? Then why did I catch you tapping your foot in time with the drumbeat?"

"The rhythmic patterns intrigued me," Seven replied with frosty dignity. But then, to Janeway's surprise, Seven added, "Will the T'kari be safe?"

"I think so. Inarra told me that Avan-aram values entertainers and likes the T'kari. They'll be able to earn a new ship and keep on traveling—away from the Morak, of course."

"Now, I'm going to tell Master Leonardo about the T'kari. Care to join me?"

She turned toward the corridor, then paused. Seven was still gazing downward, her expression unreadable. With a silent sigh, Janeway returned to her side. "No, Seven, nothing's ever neat and simple in life. But... maybe one day Lari will come and find us. She'll be older and stronger then."

"Who knows? Maybe she'll even be strong enough to give us a push... all the way home."

about the Authors

Joseph Sherman is a fantasy novelist and folklorist whose latest titles include the dark urban fantasy *Son of Darkness (Rag)*, the folklore title *Meridian's Kin: World Tales of the Hero Magician (Dragon House)*, and, together with Susan Schwartz, two *Star Trek* novels, *Vulcan's Forge* and (coming in 1999) *Vulcan's Heart*. She is also a fan of the *New York Mets*, aviation, and space science. Visit her at www.sff.net/people/Josepha.Sherman



For the past fourteen years, Susan Schwartz has been a financial writer and editor at various long-suffering Wall Street firms. For the past twenty years, she has written, edited, and reviewed fantasy and science fiction. Her most recent books are *Shards of Empire (Tor)* and the forthcoming *Cross and Crescent (Tor)*. She has published more than sixty pieces of short fiction and has been nominated for the *Nebula Award* five times, the *Hugo Award* twice, and the *World Fantasy Award* and the *Edgar Award* once each. She lives in Forest Hills, New York, with a computer, a lot of books, and a notorious shoe collection.

about the illustrator

Joseph De Vito's stunning portrait of Seven of Nine is featured on this month's cover. For more details about De Vito's work, see page 3.



A Night at Sandrine's

It started as a party, and ended with a new beginning

BY CHRISTIE GOLDEN

Stardate 50396.2

The cool, briny scent of the sea floated through the damp air. Mist clung to the stone buildings and made the cobblestone of the old streets slick with moisture. The golden glow of lamps gleamed faintly through the fog to guide the wanderer home, and as he opened the door, the welcoming sounds of laughter and music wafted out to greet him. All was warmth and good humor here, especially tonight.

He stood in the doorway, savoring the moment. Yvette was performing "La vie en rose," her red mouth curving about the words and quivering ever so slightly. Smells of smoke from the crackling fire, of perfume and of good food made him smile. Though a woman owned the establishment, in a sense, this place truly belonged to him. Whatever their rank outside these doors might be, he knew: Sooner or later, everyone came to Sandrine's.

He adjusted his fedora and brought the cigarette to his lips. The tip flared orange as he inhaled, and—

"You're puffing your carrot."

"What?" Lieutenant Tom Paris was startled out of his reverie by the sound of B'Elanna Torres's voice.

The half-Klingon chief engineer grinned up at him. "Your carrot," she repeated, indicating the carrot stick he held in his hand. She mimed bringing it to her lips and inhaling from it. "You were doing this?"

Paris felt himself blush. "Oh. Guess I just got caught up in the moment." Deliberately, he popped the vegetable into his mouth and crunched on it.

And a hell of a moment it was. Captain Janeway had yielded to Paris's request for an old-fashioned party in the holodeck, specifically program Paris 3—a French bistro called Chez Sandrine's. Voyager was presently traveling through a very long and very boring stretch of the Nekrit Expanse, and Paris had capitalized on the crew's restlessness. Together with Neelix, the self-appointed "moral officer," they had convinced Janeway that a party was just what the doctor ordered.

Taking it a step further, Paris had suggested it be a costume party. Most had agreed. Tom saw fedoras and trench coats, suits and canes and upturned hairdos and hats with netting—all right out of Earth's mid-20th century.

"Yes!" exclaimed Harry Kim as he sank the eight ball. He looked very young and innocent in tweed trousers, crisp white shirt and red suspenders. Gaunt Gary, the resident pool shark Paris had recruited, feigned resignation.

"Psy up." Harry extended his hand as Gary sighed and handed over a fistful of holographic money.

Paris knew what was coming. "Rematch? I'd like to get some of that green stuff back," said Gary.

"Oh, you bet, but I'll just take your money again," enthused Kim, already racking the balls.

"Harry, Harry, Harry," sighed Paris, shaking his head as he moved toward a small table by the fire. "He ought to know better. Gary's gonna fleece him."

"You know," said B'Elanna, slipping into the chair opposite Paris. "I'm surprised Chakotay agreed to this, after your last adventure with gambling."

"Ah, Chakotay's not so tough. Neelix and I swore that all the gambling proceeds would go right back into the replicator to provide some decent food for the party." With an extravagant wave, he indicated the lavish buffet, of which other crewmembers were eagerly partaking.

"Think he'll show up tonight?" she asked.

Tom shrugged. Sandrine was chatting with some other customers, and he flagged down Neelix, who was acting as maitre d' for the evening. The Talaxian grinned and ambled over toward them. He looked surprisingly debonair in the formal black-and-white tuxedo. Paris guessed he'd waxed his whiskers.

"Chakotay?" said Tom. "I don't know. Don't know if we'll see the Captain, either. They're kind of like your mom and dad sometimes, you know? 'You kids have your party, but don't stay up too late.'"

ILLUSTRATION BY LAURA LAKEY



Neelix, who was pouring small glasses of port for each of them, laughed a little. "I hadn't thought about it that way, but I suppose you're right. Monsieur Paris, Mademoiselle Torres, here you are—a lovely port, replicated especially for the occasion."

"Thanks, Neelix," said B'Elanna. She brought the glass to her lips; then her eyes widened slightly. "Hey, boys. Mom's here."

Neelix followed her gaze. "My, my. I don't know about you two, but my mother never looked like that."

Paris, who was searching the room for one particular person, idly glanced toward the entrance of the bistro. And nearly spilled his wine.

Captain Janeway had, in every sense of the word, let her hair down. The red-brown mass tumbled about her bare shoulders, caught up on one side with a jeweled pin that reflected the mischievous sparkle in her blue eyes. Her floor-length gown of

black satin clung to her slim figure in a most flattering fashion, but there was no hint of anything but elegance and class about her. The room fell silent. Janeway lifted her chin and smiled.

"Caesar has arrived," she announced. "Let the games begin!"

Approving laughter and a smattering of applause followed her statement. Grinning broadly, Janeway swept into the room and picked up a cue with the familiarity of one who knew the game well.

"Excuse me, but I shouldn't keep such a lovely lady waiting. Especially when the lady is our captain," said Neelix, hastening to Janeway with a glass of port already poured.

Paris was pleased. Not only had his captain actually showed up, but she was clearly getting into the spirit of things. Now if only another certain someone would show—

And there she was, standing in the entrance and looking

about hesitantly. She was a stunning brunette, with carefully coiffed hair, chocolate brown eyes, wearing an elegantly tailored suit. There wasn't a woman in the place who could touch her for sultry dark good looks.

Ricky. The one constant in every holographic program Tom Paris had ever designed. She had appeared as the gentle damsel in distress in a knights-in-shining-armor scenario, a sexy Orion slave girl in another, and was the innocent American Abroad here in Sandrine's.

"Excuse me, my date is here," Tom said to B'Elanna. Eagerly, he rose and started to head in Ricky's direction when the bistro's owner, Sandrine, stopped him. She gazed up at him, her eyes cold and angry.

"Where were you last night?" she asked.

He shrugged. "That was so long ago I don't remember."

Conversation had stopped, and Paris, mortified, realized two things: Ricky—pretty, passive Ricky—had thrown him, and everyone had seen it.

"Will I see you tonight?"

"I never make plans that far in advance," Sandrine was an extremely attractive older woman, and Tom was more than familiar with her charms. Tonight, though, he was in the mood for passive adoration, not Sandrine's tigerish loveplay. The jealous Frenchwoman had once sneered at Ricky, calling her a "little puppy dog." Tom had replied that he wouldn't have Ricky any other way. She would be the icing on the cake to his triumph tonight. It was all going exactly as he planned.

Ricky had stepped inside and was heading toward the bar. Tom, smiling, sneaked up behind her and playfully put his hands over her eyes.

"Guess—"

He never made it to "who." The next thing he knew he was flat on his back, gasping for air like a fish, and staring up into Ricky's furious face. Conversation had stopped, and Paris, mortified, realized two things: Ricky—pretty, passive Ricky—had thrown him, and everyone had seen it.

He rose slowly, dusting himself off, and searched frantically for the least embarrassing way out of this confusing scenario.

He found it. "Excellent," Paris said with false heartiness. "You've mastered the throw even when you weren't expecting to have to use it. Everyone, give the lady a hand, she's spent a lot of time practicing self-defense!"

He started the applause. Others joined in, unsure what was going on. Paris caught Yvette's eye, gesticulated, and she immediately launched into "*Les amants d'un jour*." The other crewmembers turned back to their drinks, pool games, or conversation. Thank God, he was out of the spotlight for the moment. He wiped his face. It was wet. The movement made his back ache.

"Who the hell are you?" snapped Ricky. Her rambling, sultry voice held no hint of teasing.

"Honey—" Paris moved forward placatingly, but she stepped backward just as quickly.

"Don't touch me again," she warned. "I asked you a question."

Paris gaped. "Ricky, don't you know me? It's Tom, sweetheart, Tommy boy." He reached to touch her, to bring his face down to hers. "Perhaps this'll jog your memory."

Her slap almost bruised him. "I'm getting out of this—Sandrine! What kind of a place are you running these days?"

"Certainement, I am not sure I know myself," answered Sandrine, impaling Paris with her gaze. "It would appear that just *anybody* thinks he can wander into my bistro."

Tom's pleasant evening was rapidly unraveling. He glanced, utterly nonplussed, from Ricky to Sandrine. Normally, they reserved their glares for one another and treated him with sweet eyes and soft lips. Now, they had adopted almost mirrored poses—arms crossed, eyes hard and angry.

"Please observe the series of events," said a slightly strident voice that Paris didn't recognize. He turned to look at the speaker. She was petite but stood ramrod straight. Every strand of brown hair was in place, her makeup was perfect, her clothing suited to the occasion without being in the least remarkable. Her mouth and nose had a slightly pinched look to them. Tom figured her for somewhere in her forties.

The Doctor stood beside the woman, looking, as usual, rather pleased with himself. The woman continued.

"This . . . person—I hardly think he can be called a gentleman—beseezes approaches, *from behind*, a woman with whom he is unacquainted. When, understandably startled, she reacts instinctively to defend herself, he does not admit that he was in the wrong but instead invents a story to hide his shame. He then continues his pursuit of her without even bothering to properly introduce himself or apologize. He attempts an intimacy which would be improper in a public place under any circumstance and is justly reprimanded." The woman turned her piercing gaze to Ricky. "Bravo, Mademoiselle. He is a scoundrel and does not deserve you."

"Who the hell are you?" demanded Paris, echoing Ricky's earlier question. His face was red, but with anger this time.

"Note the demand. He fails to observe any sort of etiquette." The harriidan turned to the Doctor. "I do hope that your situation has not deteriorated to such a level."

"Not at all," the Doctor replied. "I am merely a diamond in need of polishing. Mr. Paris, I fear, hasn't even been chipped out of the rock yet. Mr. Paris, may I present Etta. Etta, dear, this is Lieutenant Thomas Eugene Paris. He's *Voyager's* pilot."

Etta extended a hand. "Charmed," she said in a voice that indicated she was anything but.

Recovering slightly, Tom bent over the gloved hand, kissed it quickly, and bowed. "A pleasure," he lied.

She raised an eyebrow. "Somewhat better."

"At Kes's suggestion, I've created a holographic character whom I have programmed with every nuance of human etiquette," the Doctor explained. "I thought perhaps this might help me become more efficient in dealing with my patients. Kes seems to think I'm lacking in that area."

"Kes's comments implied no criticism, and you have slighted her," reprimanded the etiquette program. "If we see her this

evening, I suggest you apologize."

"See? It's working beautifully." He smirked a little.

"She going to tell us which wine to serve at your memorial service when I delete your program?" Tom smiled. Charming. He took perverse pleasure in the nasty looks both the Doctor and Etta shot him before they made their way to their table.

Tom watched them go. He wondered if he could bribe Neelix into spilling red wine on Etta's white blouse. Dismissing the thought, he turned again to Ricky.

She was gone.

"Having a bad night?" It was Torres.

"Uh, yeah, you could say that. B'Elanna," he went on, turning to her, "has there been any problem with the holodeck recently? Any, I don't know, unexpected surges of energy, something like that?"

She frowned. Her ridged brow furrowed even more than usual. "Not that I'm aware of."

Paris rubbed the small of his back. He thought about dragging the Doctor away from his supercilious date and getting the twinge treated, then dismissed the idea. The Doctor would refuse, on the grounds that the pain was deserved, and merely score another point with Etta. He'd just let the pain of the throw work its way out.

"I don't get it," he said, more to himself than Torres. "Usually when she's mad at me she..."

"She what?" prompted Torres. She was grinning up at him in an almost malevolent fashion.

"You're enjoying this, aren't you?"

She shrugged. Belatedly, he realized that she, too, had dressed for the occasion. Torres wore a fashionable white and blue suit-dress with white pumps and a broad-brimmed hat. Her hair was styled, and she even sported dangly diamond earrings. Almost absently, he acknowledged that she looked good. Great, in fact.

"When your buddy Gaunt Gary over there gave me some line about treating tramps like ladies and vice versa, I said he was a pig and you were too, for designing him."

"So you did."

"Can I help it if I think it's funny that now you're getting a little maddy?"

He'd taken B'Elanna's glibbing before, often, and almost as often admitted that she had a point. Now, though, anger rose in him. Everyone had this image of him, and suddenly he was painfully aware of the fact that it no longer fit. That, moreover, he didn't even like it anymore. That Ricky was acting *really* out of character, and that the only way that could happen, barring outside interference, was if—

The realization struck him so hard that for a moment he couldn't breathe. "I'm out of here," he said, and headed for the door.

He almost ran to his quarters, his heart racing, Redemption. Here it was, finally. His chance to make everything right, to show everyone, especially her, that he wasn't so bad, that he could change, *had* changed.

Her brown eyes, so soft and warm, were cold now. Her lips were pressed in a thin line, and her body was held aloof from his tender touch. So often, when she was like this, it had been easy to melt her

with the right word, the touch in just the right spot.

"I can't bundle it anymore," she said. "You keep promising that you'll change, and you don't. I don't think you even can, let alone want to. I've been with you for two and a half years now, and that's about two years and five months too long."

"Ricky..." he began.

"You know I don't like being called that. My name is Richenda."

"Of course it is, baby."

Now the cold eyes flashed. "I'm not your baby, damn it, Tom! I'm an adult and I have needs, and I do not deserve the way you treat me."

The computer had found what he wanted. He leaned forward, listening eagerly, fearfully.

"Moriarty," it began in its cool, familiar female voice. "Professor James. A character created by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle in the Sherlock Holmes stories of the late nineteenth century. Designed as a holodeck program by Lieutenant Commander Data and refined by Chief Engineer Geordi La Forge aboard the starship *Enterprise*..."

Harry smothered a grin at the satisfying click of the cue ball on the eight ball. The black ball rolled slowly toward the side pocket, seemed to consider its options, then dropped in obediently.

"I win again," he said to Gaunt Gary.

The holographic character frowned. "Maybe I ain't been so nice to you, girl," he said to his cue, patting the shaft affectionately. "Get you a little more chalk next time."

Torres walked up to him. "Nice game. Can you be a little more obvious?"

"Hey, I like to win as much as the next guy," protested Kim.

"Gary—rack 'em up, will you?" The simulation glowered at him. Harry turned to face Torres. "So, how do you think it's going?"

To his surprise, she looked troubled. "I'm not sure. Part of the fun was that he'd be here and we could watch what happened. The computer says he's been in his quarters, accessing the ship's database, for the last three hours. I'm going to go check on him."

"Don't blow it." He watched her go, her heels clicking against the simulated wood of Sandrine's floor, then looked over at the Doctor and Etta.

He grinned. The Doctor, who had only a few hours before been so infuriated with his clever etiquette program, looked utterly deflated. Etta looked exactly as she had looked when they first walked in. And she hadn't stopped talking. She had criticized how he placed his napkin, how he ordered dinner, how he spooned the soup, how he ate through three courses, and how he selected and sipped his after-dinner drink.

"... and when a lady approaches, you should always rise," Etta droned on. "Your chair-holding needs work. Let's try it again."

"Etta, I'd rather not."

"You have been resisting my excellent advice all through the meal," she said. "One might think you didn't enjoy my company."

The Doctor gazed at her and stated bluntly, "I don't."

She gasped. "How extremely rude. We'll have to work on

verbal courtesy next."

The Doctor smiled. "You know, I somehow don't think we will. Computer, delete etiquette program." Etta's eyes flew wide and she opened her mouth to protest.

"Permanently," he added.

Etta disappeared. The Doctor sighed, picked up the napkin from his lap, crumpled it vigorously and then tucked it into his shirt at the neckline. "Garçon!" he called to one of the waiters. "A second dessert. Something gooey. And no utensils."

As the waiter hurried away, the Doctor smiled, gently and with tremendous satisfaction.

Kim chuckled.

"You treat me like a, a pet, a plaything. I stayed because I love you, Tommy. My God, do I love you. I've taken treatment from you that I would never have stood for from anyone else, but it's over now."

"Fine with me, sweetheart," said Tom. "I don't care one way or the other. We had some fun, and—"

"Yeah, sure, we had some fun. A million laughs." She gazed at him with pity instead of anger in her dark brown eyes. "I know you don't love me, Tommy. And that's all right. What makes me feel so sorry for you is I'm not sure if you'll ever love anyone. And that's a frightening way to go through life."

The door chimed softly. Paris jerked awake, realizing that he'd fallen asleep. Rubbing his eyes, he called, "Come in."

The door hissed open. Torres stood there for a moment, the soft lighting from the corridor playing over her features and casting them into a mosaic of shadow and light.

She sniffed. "Coffee? I thought you would be indulging in some exotic vintage, or a neat whiskey." She entered and regarded him evenly. "It's late. Aren't you going to go to bed?"

"Not right now."

"Are you planning on going to bed in the near future?"

"No."

"You ever going to bed?"

"No!" he shot back, starting to get annoyed.

"Then I'm not sleepy either." She sat down on the desk.

"What are you working on that has you away from your own party drinking coffee alone in your quarters?"

His eyes searched hers; then he made a decision. "You might be able to help me out, at that," he said. He tapped in instructions to the computer. Instantly, a female face appeared on the screen.

"Do you know who this is?" he asked Torres.

She frowned. "It's your holographic sweetie, isn't it? Ricky? Though her hair's different and she looks a bit older."

Tom nodded. "It is . . . and it isn't. This woman is Richenda Masterson. She didn't seem to recognize the name." "The founder of the Interplanetary Art Exchange program."

B'Elanna chewed on her lip. "That sounds familiar—is she the one who takes groups of artists and visits different worlds? The one who invented the mathematical art theory?"

"Exactly. I knew her several years ago, when she was studying in France. We met at Sandrine's."

She looked at him with a new appreciation. "She's the only human artist I know of who's managed to impress both the Vulcans and the Klingons. You knew Richenda Masterson?"

Tom grimaced. "We were . . . involved, for a while."

Torres glanced away. "Oh. You don't have to tell me—"

"I know, but I want to. I need your help, and you've got to understand why. Richenda was one of the most amazingly talented and brilliant women I've ever met." He looked back at the screen, at the older but no less beautiful visage of "Ricky" Masterson. "I was the luckiest guy in the world. She loved me."

"What happened?"

"She left me because I treated her badly," Tom said bluntly. His voice was flat. "I wasn't in love with her and, damn me for a bastard, I played her like Harry plays that clarinet. The more hoops she jumped through for me, the less I thought of her—and the more hoops I held up. Finally, she had enough and walked out on me." His voice suddenly betrayed him, cracking a little. "Smartest thing she ever did."

Torres still wouldn't look at him. "Tom, there's something I have to tell you."

He ignored her. He was afraid if he stopped now, he'd never get it all out, and he had to tell Torres if he were to ever make it right.

"Back at the Academy, when I had girl trouble—she didn't notice me, or she wasn't nice, or whatever—I'd get my own sort of revenge. I'd start calling my ship by her name. That way, it was almost like being able to make the girl do whatever I wanted. Pretty childish, but I thought it didn't harm anyone. When Richenda left—I didn't want her to go. I wanted her to stay and be someone that I could handle. So from the minute I had my first opportunity to visit a holodeck and create my own programs, Ricky was in them. I made her do whatever I wanted her to do. She was always willing, always patient, she'd never leave me—"

"Tom, stop it!" Torres whirled on him suddenly. He couldn't read her expression, but she was agitated. "Harry and I—"

"It was wrong, and I know it was wrong. But I've got a chance to make it up to her!" Paris barreled on. "Don't you see? Something has happened with Ricky's program. She's not the same character I designed, and if nothing's gone wrong on the ship, then there's only one answer. Somehow, she's become sentient!"

"No, Tom—"

"It's happened before. Remember the Moriarty incident? We all got that lecture before going into the holodecks back at the Academy. I admit, the Moriarty program evolved because it was so complex, and Ricky was designed to be anything but, but it's happened and I need your help. If we can—"

"Listen to me!" Tom blinked, startled at her outburst. "It's not that, Tom. Ricky's not sentient. I—we—Harry and I decided to play a trick on you." She swallowed, hard, but kept her eyes locked with his. "I broke into your program and redesigned Ricky to make her behave more like a real person. I got so sick of her prancing around, and we thought it'd be funny. We had no idea about—that you'd take it so seriously. We thought you'd catch on right away, especially when Harry programmed your pool shark to lose all the time. I'm so sorry, Tom. It was just a joke."

He felt the blood drain from his face. Just a joke. He'd just bared his soul, dared to hope for a chance at correcting some of the obscenely cruel things he'd done when he was young and half-mad with pain and guilt over the accident back at the Academy,

all because Kim and Torres thought it would be *funny* if—

"I hope you and Harry have a good laugh," he said, his voice eerily quiet. "Now get out."

"I've never seen him like that." Torres finished. Harry looked as miserable as she felt.

"I guess I can't blame him," said Harry softly.

A pool cue tapped on his shoulder. "How 'bout another round, kid?" asked Gaunt Gary.

"No, thanks." As the big pool shark strode away, his attention on Captain Janeway, who had also beaten him tonight, Harry added softly, "It's no fun anymore."

"You said it," Torres glanced about. It was very late. Nearly everyone else was gone, and Sandrine was starting to gather up the glasses. Neelix looked at the few crumbs that remained of the lavish feast and smiled. Captain Janeway declined an invitation to another game of pool and, on Chakotay's arm, headed for the door. The only other real people left in the holodeck were Harry and B'Elanna. Everyone else was a hologram, a figment of the imagination, and even they were going home for the "night." None of this was real. And yet, because of these illusions, she and Harry had inadvertently hurt their friend. Because of these illusions, Tom had done so much to hurt himself.

Harry yawned and rubbed at his eyes.

"I'm going to turn in."

"You go ahead. I don't think he's going to show. We can catch him tomorrow and apologize."

He wandered through the heavy wooden doors and disappeared into the foggy night. Torres heard the doors to the holodeck hiss open, then shut.

She accepted the last glass of red wine and a neat scotch from Neelix, who, sensing her troubled spirit, tactfully left her alone. Leaving the scotch untouched, Torres sipped the wine slowly.

She didn't like to lie, but she had lied to Harry just now. She did think Tom would show up one more time tonight. At least, she hoped he would. If he didn't, then he was more broken than even he knew.

Even the drunks had gone home, thought Paris as he opened the door to Chez Sandrine's. The only reason the place was still open at this ungodly hour was because he had never bothered to program a closing time for the bistro. But there was a stillness about the place. Sandrine's might never close, but the characters did have set agendas.

Sandrine was there, of course, washing up. Yvette was performing her traditional final number, "*Non, je ne regrette rien*." The gigolo was in hushed, urgent conversation with his latest conquest. Gaunt Gary had put away his cue and was shrugging into his jacket. He gave Paris a curt nod, adjusted his fedora, and went out into the night.

And B'Elanna Torres was at the bar, nursing a final drink. She straightened, sensing his eyes on her, and turned around. Their eyes met for a long time. Then she smiled—a soft, sweet smile that he'd never seen from her before, that gentled her edgy Klingon features.

He liked that smile.

She put down her drink, thanked Sandrine, and picked up a shot glass of scotch. She glided past him without a word, pressing the scotch into his hand, and left the holodeck. He was, for all intents and purposes, given his privacy.

Now or never, Tommy, he thought, and closed his hand around the cool, small glass.

"*Non, je ne regrette rien*," crooned Yvette. *I regret nothing.* An ironic anthem for Tom, who regretted nearly everything he'd ever done.

"Computer," he said. His voice cracked. "Computer," he repeated. "Activate holoprogram Ricky."

At once, she was there. She looked around, a bit startled; then her brown eyes narrowed as she saw him.

"You again."

He nodded. "Yeah. Listen, can we talk?"

"I don't—"

"Please." He could hear the pleading in his voice, but he didn't care. She just had to stay long enough to hear him out.

Ricky—Richenda—regarded him for a long, cool moment, then nodded. He gestured to the table by the fire, and they seated themselves. Sandrine glanced at them but declined to comment. Paris was grateful for that. For all her flirting, the real Sandrine was, at heart, a good woman, and he had pro-

"Please." He could hear the pleading in his voice, but he didn't care. She just had to stay long enough to hear him out.

grammed her doppelganger thus.

"I'd like to tell you a story," he began, running a finger idly over the rim of the shot glass. "It's a story about a young man who had a universe full of happiness, and was too much of a fool to realize it. This young man had friends, a family who loved him, and a promising career. But he was so busy thinking about what he didn't have that he got careless one day. And because of his carelessness, three people, his two closest friends and the woman he loved, were killed."

He didn't look at Ricky, but sensed her softening, her compassion. He kept his eyes on the table and continued.

"The young man was horrified. But he was also selfish. So he lied about the accident. But you know something? Lies aren't just words. Lies sit there in the pit of your stomach and eat you up from the inside out, until there's nothing left of you inside at all. You're just a walking shell, with darkness where your heart and guts should be."

Something warm brushed his back. Her hand, stroking, calming, wordless. That was how Ricky showed her sympathy—not with words, but gestures.

"So our empty young hero, with no heart and no guts left to speak of, tried to fill that emptiness with alcohol and women and parties. And the universe, which had always been so kind to him, one day gave him yet another kindness that he didn't deserve. It gave him a woman named Richenda Masterson, who had more talent and courage and intelligence in her little finger than he had in his whole rotten shell. But you know

what? The young man was so eaten up inside he didn't realize what the universe had done. He hurt Richenda. He belittled her gift. He took from her and gave her nothing in return but contempt and disinterest, thus ensuring that the emptiness inside him would only continue to grow."

"That sounds like a sad story," said Richenda, her voice husky. "Does it have a sad ending, too?"

Now Tom looked at her. His heart almost broke. If only he could do it over again—

"I don't know. The last chapter hasn't been written." Hesitantly, he took her hand. He hadn't programmed the calluses into Ricky's hands. Richenda's work in stone and wood had made her fingers powerful and strong. She opted to keep the calluses and scars, though a dermal regenerator would easily get rid of them. She was proud of them, she told him; proud of what they symbolized. It was yet one more thing Tom had taken from Richenda.

"Do you understand that you're a hologram?" he asked her.

She nodded. "Of course."

"Let me tell you who you are. You are what I made of Richenda Masterson. When the real Richenda left me, I made you—Ricky. A Richenda who would never leave, would always wait for me, would never argue. I turned a wonderful, real human being into my own personal toy. When I saw you tonight, after B'Elanna had reprogrammed you—I wanted to make it up to Richenda."

There was no more anger in her face now, only sorrow and gentleness. She covered his hand with her own. "Tom—I'm just a hologram. I'm not Richenda."

He nodded. "I know. And I hope to God that someday I'll be able to tell the real Richenda just what I'm telling you. But I'm thousands of light-years from home, and I not only owe her an apology—I owe you one, too. I'm sorry."

Tears stood in her eyes. "I forgive you, Tom," she whispered. "And I think that, one day, Richenda will forgive you, too." She leaned forward and kissed him softly, without passion.

Tom savored the kiss, then pulled back. He stroked her face one last time, touched the thick softness of her dark hair. Lifting the scotch glass—the shot of courage B'Elanna had given him—he toasted her.

"Here's looking at you, kid." He downed the scotch and set the glass on the table. Only one more thing left to do, to make it as right as he could.

"Computer," he said, gazing into her eyes. "Delete hologram Ricky. Permanently."

She was still smiling as she disappeared.

Torres was waiting for him outside the holodeck entrance, leaning up against a bulkhead. They regarded one another for a long moment.

"How's Ricky?" she finally asked.

He took a deep breath, held it, exhaled. "Ricky won't be at Sandrine's anymore."

She ducked her head, not looking at him as she spoke. "I'm proud of you, Tom. That took courage."

Automatically Paris formed a flip comment, but the words died in his throat. He wasn't feeling flip, and the thought of faking his emotions right now suddenly made him slightly sick to

his stomach. He tossed his coat over his shoulder, carrying it with his index finger. They walked in silence for a while.

"You know, honestly, I was getting kind of tired of Sandrine's, anyway," said Torres.

"Yeah, me too."

"How about another program? Like, maybe, pirates or something?"

He was suddenly very glad that she had waited for him. He glanced down at her and grinned. Pirates, huh?

"You know, B'Elanna," he said, "I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship." ♣

about the author



Christie Golden has published ten novels since 1991, including three Star Trek: Voyager books (*The Murdered Sun*, *Marooned*, and *Seven of Nine*), four novels in *TSR's RAVENLOFT* line, and the novelization of Steven Spielberg's *Invasion America*. She is currently working on the first *Voyager* trilogy and a historical fantasy, 1999, under the pen name of Jadrien Bell.

Christie lives in Colorado with her husband, two cats, and a white German shepherd puppy. She has published fourteen other short stories, but *A Night at Sandrine's* is her first fiction sale to a magazine.

about the illustrator

Laura Lokry's parents enrolled her in a drawing class when she was seven years old, and she has been in the illustration field, one way or another, ever since. She and her husband John operate a freelance studio in Scottsdale, Arizona, producing work for a wide variety of clients—including *AMAZING STORIES*, which has published a number of their creations over the last several years.



Amazing facts

IF YOU'VE NEVER SEEN the cover of the December 1928 issue of *AMAZING STORIES* before, you now have some small idea of what Jack Williamson must have felt when he discovered, thanks to this Frank R. Paul painting, that "*The Metal Man*" had been published. Jack's name does not appear on the cover—after all, he was unknown to the magazine's readers—but he knew right away the cover was depicting a scene from his story.

As part of his introduction to the story, editor Hugo Gernsback remarked that "*The Metal Man* contains an abundant matter of mystery, adventure, and, for a short story, a surprising amount of true science." Does that mean that other stories in the issues Hugo edited had an unsurprising amount of true science, or a surprising amount of untrue science? ...

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*Between what was and what might
have been is an invisible line.
Or perhaps no line at all.*

Tick.

In the banquet hall of a sprawling castle of a house, the woman looks up, startled. The dishes of the night's dinner still litter the long table before her. At the evening's outset the table had been so clean, its settings so precise. She tries to recall each step in its journey from order to chaos but fails.

Tick.

She jumps again at the sound. A man's wristwatch lies at the table's far end. He has left it, forgotten or unwanted. Or for another reason. The watch is old with a broken strap, the woman young with a broken heart. The watch lies face down, but she knows it is the old-fashioned kind with hands. A date will show in a little window. A date from a time long ago. Two lives ago. It will be today's date. She wonders how she knows that.

Tick.

Rising, she moves toward the watch....

STATE *of* DISORDER

"My God, James. Look at this place," Caroline exclaimed.

James Mackaby put down the book he was reading to their young son, David, and looked out the window of their limousine. Their driver was negotiating a street filled with refuse and the abandoned corpses of burnt-out cars. Under a late afternoon sun, men in ragged clothing slept or sprawled on steps before low-rise apartments. The nearest group of men shouted something at the car as they passed around a bottle.

The limousine pulled up to the curb in front of a dirty gray three-story building. Crumbling steps led to a door with a crisscross of planks covering its broken glass. Mackaby surveyed the scene and looked back to his wife. "Looks like Doctor Harnish has fallen lower than I thought."

"Are you sure it's wise to go?" Caroline asked. "He was very

ILLUSTRATION BY
GARY KELLEY





uncivil to you when the university dismissed him."

Mackaby felt uneasy at the memory. But, for her sake, he forced a smile. "He was treating everyone that way by then."

"Still ..."

"And he's asking for my help now. Besides, I can't cancel a dinner this late, though I know better ways to spend an evening." He grinned and she smiled, rubbing her foot against his. He gave David a hug. "Bye-bye, my big man. Be good."

David hugged him back. "Can we read my story later, Daddy?"

"Daddy won't be back until past bedtime, dear. We'll read it tomorrow." He pulled Caroline to him in a long kiss, then stepped from the car into cool fall air, her perfume swirling in his head. He spoke to their driver. "Pick me up at ten o'clock sharp. Apartment 202. If you need to, call me on my cellular." The driver nodded.

Caroline leaped out the back window. "Wait. I have your watch. They fixed it but won't have a strap till next week." She took a man's wristwatch from her purse. Gold hands, black face, broken leather strap. The inscription on the back read, "To James, forever your Caroline."

Caroline stared at the building. "James, do you ..."

Mackaby kissed her again. "I'll see you before midnight." He put the watch in his pocket and climbed the steps. At the door he stopped to wave to them, but the big Lincoln was already gone. He lowered his hand, his feeling of unease returning.

Tick.

The sound no longer startles her. She walks the length of the table to stand beside where the watch lies.

The door to the building squealed open with rusty protests at his tugging. Mackaby stepped into a small vestibule, catching his breath on the stink of urine and sweat. A filthy blanket lay under a

A faded blue robe hung on Harnish's stooped and shrunken frame. Prematurely white hair thrown straight back fell to rounded shoulders. Under his robe he wore a shirt, once white, with a tie knotted off-center at his neck. Gray slacks with a cuff in need of stitching and dirty brown slippers completed his attire. He thrust out a thin hand that Mackaby fumbled to grip. "Doctor Mackaby! So good of you to come." The older man's voice held a strength that belied his frail aspect. And the eyes in that sallow face burned as brightly as Mackaby had remembered.

Harnish ushered him into a small living room. A kitchen stood to the right. To the left, a hall led to a bathroom and the closed door of another room. Taking Mackaby's coat, Harnish stroked the material. "A quality garment. How wonderful that you can afford the finer things, eh? For me, well, I must make do with less." He hung the coat in an empty closet. "Please, please, come in and sit. We shall have a drink before dinner."

A few steps brought Mackaby to the center of the small room's bare floor. The reek of onions now assailed him. He attempted a smile. "Dinner smells wonderful, Doctor."

Harnish motioned him to one of two threadbare armchairs. A small table stood between them, a lamp with a torn shade perched near one corner and a book beside it. "Sit, sit. Ah, yes. Well, dinner will be a simpler fare than that to which you are no doubt accustomed. However, I have learned to hide the quality of the meat with some simple sauces." Harnish chuckled, as if this preview of their meal would please his guest. "Now, perhaps a scotch, a sherry? I still allow myself those luxuries."

"A sherry, please." Settling into a chair that groaned in protest, Mackaby surveyed the room. Water stains and peeling paint marked walls unadorned by art or decoration. He peeked at the book that lay on the table. Short stories by Poe, opened to "The Cask of Amontillado."

From a scratched wooden cabinet, Harnish removed a near-empty bottle and two glasses. He walked to the only other piece of furniture in the room, a dining table set for two, and poured the sherry. Handing Mackaby a glass, he settled into the

IT HAD BEEN TWO YEARS SINCE THEY LAST

row of room buttons, half showing neither names nor numbers. Finding one for 210, he counted back to what he hoped was 202. Response was immediate. "Is that you, Mackaby?"

"Yes, Doctor." He wondered if Harnish had been watching.

A harsh buzz sounded, and the inner door admitted Mackaby to a lobby of stained wallpaper and couches sprouting foam rubber and springs. The elevator was out of order, so he climbed sagging steps to a musty second-floor hall lit by random dim bulbs. He walked along, peering at room numbers. A door opened as he passed but closed quickly when he turned.

Reaching room 202, he knocked. The door opened, and Dr. Roderick Harnish stood before him. Mackaby tried to hide the shock he felt. It had been two years since they had last met. Two years can be a long time, Mackaby realized.

chair beside him, smiling at his guest. "So."

Mackaby felt awkward. "Uh, yes. So. So ..."

Harnish threw his head back, laughing. "No need for small talk, sir. Neither of us was ever good at it." Leaning forward, he tapped Mackaby's knee with a bony finger. "I will tell you what prompted my invitation that you were so gracious to accept."

Mackaby tasted his sherry. Dry but of poor quality. "I understood that you wish reinstatement to the faculty and hope that I will plead your case, due to my position on the board."

Harnish smiled. "I intend for you to play a role in my return to grace, yes." The smile left his face as he spoke. "Do you recall the Amsterdam Conference?"

Mackaby frowned. "I didn't attend. It was, what, five years ago?" Mackaby felt his sense of disquiet return.

"Five years," Harnish said, glancing to where a picture of a woman stood on a small television. Mackaby recalled that Harnish had been married. She had left him after his dismissal. Harnish continued, "You and I were approaching our zeniths. On different courses in related fields but both destined, it seemed, to become part of scientific history." He took a sip. "History. An appropriate topic, considering that conference."

"I don't follow you, Doctor," Mackaby said, letting a touch of the irritation he was feeling creep into his voice.

"Indulge me," Harnish said with a smile. "Do you remember the paper I tabled at that conference?"

Mackaby searched his memory. "I believe that it dealt with Hawking's concept of the thermodynamic arrow of time, the time direction in which disorder or entropy increases."

Harnish nodded. "Hawking argued that entropy also dictates our psychological arrow of time, our sense of temporal direction. We remember events in the order in which entropy increases, because we must. This makes the second law of thermodynamics irrelevant. Disorder increases with time because we measure time in the direction of increasing disorder."

Mackaby relaxed a bit, his unease now lost in his intellect. "Yes, I remember. You argued that if one could reverse the state of disorder in a closed system, that is, decrease the entropy, then the system would move backward on the time continuum."

"Backward on the human perception of the time line, yes."

"As I remember, that part of your work was well accepted."

Harnish dismissed this with a wave of his hand. "That was trivial. Obvious. Do you recall the real crux of my paper?"

Knowing where this was leading, Mackaby sighed. "You proposed a closed system in which you could reverse entropy, via antimatter bombardment, I believe. I don't recall the details."

Harnish stared at him unblinkingly for several breaths. "You don't recall the details," he repeated. "Well, Amsterdam was a long time ago. And as you point out, you did not attend, thus missing the impact your work here had on my own." The smile that twitched at his lips did not reach his eyes.

That, too, is now part of history." Harnish spoke as a scientist noting an experimental result, merely reporting an entry in a journal. If the man felt anything, his face did not betray it.

Still, Mackaby felt a chill. "Doctor, I did not realize that Thelbrend had leveraged my early research against you."

Harnish preempted him with an upheld hand. "I do not accuse but simply state the facts. After Amsterdam, I faced ridicule at subsequent symposiums and within the faculty. Eventually, I was refused funding." Rising, he walked to the small window. Coarse burlap, strung from uneven rods above, posed as curtains. He stared at the street below. An uneasy silence, as ugly as the window coverings, hung between them. Mackaby was about to end the strange evening when Harnish turned back to him. "Such a lovely neighborhood, I fear I will forget it." Harnish motioned him to the table. "Please sit. I will serve."

Pondering the odd remark, Mackaby took his place, facing the kitchen. To discreetly monitor the hour, he placed his watch with the broken strap in front of him. A microwave beeped. Harnish returned with two steaming bowls. They ate in silence, the soup a thin potato cream, too salty for Mackaby's taste.

Harnish chuckled, and Mackaby looked up. A crooked smile twisted the man's lips. "Do you know, Mackaby, how I spent my remaining funds after Amsterdam?"

Mackaby shook his head. "You have published no paper since that conference. You fired your assistants—"

"They betrayed me," Harnish interrupted in a low tone. "Telling my secrets to my enemies, stealing my ideas..."

He is mad, Mackaby thought. "Yes, well, in any event, you then worked alone. No one knew how you directed your energies."

His host's smile held no warmth. "Then tonight shall bring revelation." Under his breath, almost inaudible, he added, "and much, much more." He stared hard at Mackaby, then around him, as if seeing the room for the first time, a grimace contorting his face. "Enough. It is time," he muttered. Rising, he hobbled to the

MET. MACKABY TRIED TO HIDE HIS SHOCK.

Mackaby's mouth felt dry. He took a drink. "My work at the time dealt with an obscure offshoot of research into black holes. True, it dealt with entropic boundary issues, but—"

"Your research illuminated a flaw in my theory, Mackaby. Boundary definition. Thelbrend of MIT picked up on it in his paper, presented after my own. I proved that my method would reduce the entropy of all matter contained within my shielded system. However, Thelbrend showed that the entropy of the shielding wall containing this matter would increase, offsetting this reduction." His lips quivered. "Total entropy within my system would increase, not decrease."

Mackaby said nothing, unable to look away from Harnish's gaze. His hand felt hot and sticky on the sherry glass.

"Thelbrend destroyed my career. Using your work, Mackaby,

narrow hall leading to the closed door of the second room.

Mackaby heard a key turn and a door open and close. Then nothing. He waited. Still nothing. His patience exhausted, he rose, intending to leave. Remembering his watch, he turned back to the table. And stopped. The timepiece was nowhere to be seen. He searched the table and floor, but in vain.

The watch was gone.

A low buzz rose above the street noise and climbed quickly to a high-pitched whining. A tingling sensation shot up his spine. Vertigo and weakness flooded him. He slumped back into his chair, knocking the table, spilling his sherry. The stain spread across the tablecloth where his watch had lain.

A noise brought his head up. Splitting diagonally, the wall beside the kitchen door pulled apart. Behind the crack

appeared not a view into the tiny kitchen, but an empty whiteness. Mute with terror, Mackaby struggled again to his feet. As he stumbled to the door, the small room stretched away from him. Details thinned, edges blurred, colors faded. With a shriek, the scene shattered like a mirror struck by a hammer. Jagged shards of reality spun into a white void. He heard his son David call "Daddy," heard himself scream, felt himself falling, felt...

Nothing.

Tick.

She wonders idly how it can sound so loud, this little watch. Perhaps, she thinks, I only hear it in my mind. This thought does not concern her.

She reaches for the watch. ...

Mackaby wiped his mouth on a fine linen napkin as the final notes of a Vivaldi concerto wafted from the stereo. "Excellent risotto, Doctor. My compliments to your chef."

Harnish picked a thread from his dinner jacket, smiling thinly down the dining room table. "Not my chef, I'm afraid, Mackaby. Such extravagances are yet beyond me. However, I did take the liberty of hiring a caterer."

Harnish had been the perfect host, yet Mackaby still felt uncomfortable. "You shouldn't have gone to such expense, sir."

Harnish's pale lips curled into a one-cornered smile. "I assure you, such items are trifles compared to my other efforts toward this evening." He rang a small silver bell. A uniformed servant appeared through French doors behind him. The man removed the plates, disappearing again into the kitchen.

Mackaby looked over his host again. Short-cropped graying hair on a square head set on a body still ramrod straight as in his youth. "That is the second reference you've made, Doctor, to a singular aspect of this evening. Just what is the occasion?"

"Why, the anniversary of this dinner!" Harnish ignored the

much more satisfying if you remembered it all. I suppose I will have to make do with telling you. Once I am done, that is."

His anger building, Mackaby rose to face the smaller man. "Doctor, I accepted your invitation based on your promise to discuss my reinstatement to the faculty, which you said you could arrange due to your reputation and position. I now find—"

Harnish raised a hand to stop him. "How is your wife, dear boy? Caroline? Lovely girl, that."

Taken aback, Mackaby stammered out, "She is quite well, since you ask. She has had to take a job due to my situation—"

"And your son?"

Mackaby blinked. "We have no children. Neither of us wished to begin a family until I was certain of a steady income." He recovered his composure. "Doctor, I must insist you—"

Again Harnish cut him off with an imperious wave. "Enough. It is time. Again." Without even excusing himself, Harnish departed through the adjacent study. His steps echoed down the tiled hall leading to his private rooms.

Mackaby stood stunned by his host's rude and odd behavior. Then his anger returned and he determined to leave at once. As he crossed the dining room threshold, dizziness seized him and a piercing whistle stung his ears. Grasping at a door frame that writhed away from his hand, he pitched forward as the room began to melt, to flow. Colors and shapes swirled into each other like a nightmare soup of reality stirred by a cosmic hand. An image of Caroline, crying, whirled by in the vortex. Her tears became streaks of blood as the maelstrom pulled her image and him down into it, down toward a singularity of pure white nothingness.

Tick.

She holds the watch—and begins to shake. Emotions flow into her or out of her, she isn't sure which. Crying out, she slumps to the floor to lie sobbing, praying for them to end. They cease, but only when she is numbed of resistance. Then

"PITY. IT WOULD BE SO MUCH MORE

puzzled look Mackaby knew he wore. "Mind you, 'anniversary' is not quite correct. A true term does not exist, since the event has no precedent. Or rather, as only I know of its occurrence, only I require a word to describe it." He smiled.

Mackaby felt confused. "I do not understand you, Doctor."

Harnish rose and walked to the long wall of floor-to-ceiling windows. Pulling back a lace curtain with a manicured hand, he stared down at the street. Mackaby wondered what could have caught his attention, lovely though the tree-lined boulevard and sculpture garden were.

"You do not remember our first dinner, on this very date, do you?" Harnish asked, his back still to his guest.

Mackaby felt his patience waning. "What do you mean?"

Harnish turned to look at him again. "Pity. It would be so

the pictures come, and sounds, smells, touches, like waves of forgotten dreams. Of a man she loved. Of a child. Their child.

Tick.

Her hand unclenches. The watch falls to the carpet. She wonders where the man has gone, what has happened to her son.

Having finished the last crumb of his cake, Mackaby put down his fork. Harnish's uniformed butler whisked his plate and cutlery away. Looking up, Mackaby was startled to see Harnish's gaze fixed on him from the end of the long table.

"Hungry, Mackaby?" His eyes seemed to hold a secret joke.

"Roderick! You're embarrassing our guest." Caroline rose from where she sat beside Harnish, smiling at Mackaby. "I'll

leave you two alone. Roderick will want his after-dinner cigar, and I have never become used to them."

Mackaby watched her leave, his mind drifting to the ache in his heart like a tongue searching for a missing tooth. Feeling Harnish's eyes on him, Mackaby muttered, "Please excuse me, Doctor. I have not had such a meal in some time."

"Time. Yes. A long time. Five years since I last had the opportunity to host you." The amused expression remained. Mackaby hesitated, not certain how to respond. "I don't recall another instance when I have been your guest."

Harnish chuckled. "Tonight is the third time we have dined on this very date. Although . . ."—he paused, gesturing around the opulent dining hall—" . . . the decor has improved over the first of these feasts." Mackaby stared at him. Grinning, Harnish rose. "Come into the library. Tonight all shall be made clear."

Limping even with his cane, Mackaby followed him out of the dining room. Harnish stopped at the door to the library. "Ah! My apologies. I forgot how your injury has slowed you. I would have thought it healed by now."

Mackaby grimaced, trying to hide the pain he felt. "Arthritis in the knee is the main difficulty now, Doctor."

In the large study, Harnish motioned to a high-backed leather chair. Seating himself beside Mackaby, his feet on an ottoman, the older man pulled a cigar from his jacket. "Terrible thing, that plane crash, though I suppose you count yourself lucky, surviving at all. Fortunate your wife was not with you."

Mackaby looked at a painting over the fireplace. Caroline, in a blue evening dress, sat in a velvet chair. Harnish, in a tuxedo, stood behind her. Mackaby remembered when she had been his. He had planned to ask her to marry him once he became established. Then fate had turned against him. He looked back to his host. "You know I have never married."

Harnish was studying his face intently, amusement flickering behind every twitch. "Ah, yes. Silly of me." Lighting the cigar, Harnish settled into the chair. "Now, for a story. Actually three stories, although you still remember the third, so I will not bore

through three such events, all on the very same day, all quite different, except in the aspect of the fortunes each visited upon my future. And misfortunes on yours."

Harnish placed the watch on a table between them. Mackaby fought an urge to pull away. Through a haze of sudden nausea, he realized Harnish was talking again. "... say 'future,' like most fools, you extrapolate a continued existence from your present state to a better one, a transformation you effect by dreams and ignorance. I have dealt with my futures. This evening, I am concerned only with our pasts."

Mackaby felt dazed, his limbs weak. A loud ticking filled his head. "What are you talking about?" he whispered.

Harnish chuckled. "After Amsterdam, I invested my remaining funds in researching the role of entropy in other branches of science." He pushed the watch closer. Struggling, Mackaby pulled his hand away. Harnish grinned and continued. "My work led me to communications theory, where signal repetition introduces increasing disorder—entropy—in the signal."

A fire played in Harnish's eyes as the scientist supplanted the man. "I theorized a closed system in which I could generate a wave form of electromagnetic radiation displaying decreased entropy. Such a wave form would move backward with respect to our psychological arrow of time, our perception of time flow. If I could then modulate the wave form, I would have a transmitter. I would, in short, be able to send a message back in time."

Mackaby struggled to form words as the watch's ticking swarmed in his ears. He felt he must shout to be heard, but could only whisper. "Backward to where? Who would be listening?"

"I would, Mackaby. I would also build a receiver and wait in that squalid little apartment after Amsterdam for the Roderick Harnish of years yet to be to send a message. Can you guess the content of that message?" Retrieving the watch again, Harnish dangled it in front of Mackaby. Mackaby sat frozen, terrified he would touch the thing. His mind cried that such fear was baseless, but a more primal part knew better.

SATISFYING IF YOU REMEMBERED IT ALL."

you with that."

"I still remember . . . What do you mean?"

Harnish grinned through his smoke. "Why, your life, Mackaby. Or to be precise, three lives, two of which no longer exist." He put down his cigar and from a pocket removed a man's wristwatch. Holding it, he stroked it like a beloved pet. "Imagine an event which unalterably changes the balance of your life, all that you could have become, all you might have been. You would expect such an event to be memorable, would you not?"

Mackaby felt confused. And something else. He felt the beginning of fear. Irrational. He swallowed but said nothing.

Caressing the watch, Harnish continued. "Your memories of this event could be of either joy or regret, depending on the direction it moved your destiny. You and I, Mackaby, have lived

"No answer? Then I shall tell you." Harnish's face became as stone. "I would direct my younger self into research to bring him accolades, not contempt. I would direct his finances to bring him wealth." Harnish leaned closer. Mackaby could smell his sour breath. "And I would provide young Roderick with knowledge to use against those who had wronged me. Those who had mocked my work, had lied to me and about me." His voice broke, his jaw tightened. "Those who had ruined my life."

Harnish sat back, the watch swinging like Poe's pendulum blade from his fingers. "Problems arose. I found that I had but certain windows of opportunity to transmit to my earlier self. Using my own new branch of mathematics, I computed the first date when I might transmit. Can you guess that date, Mackaby?"

Mackaby knew but could not speak. Harnish reached out to lay the watch across the arm of Mackaby's chair. Cringing into the far corner of his seat, Mackaby barely dared to breathe. Apparently oblivious, Harnish rose and began pacing the room.

"Today, Mackaby, today. And since you authored my decline, I chose you to share the fruits of my labor. I followed your work and that of your contemporaries. As expected, research emerged four years later refuting your early papers after Amsterdam. Simply the progress of science—we stand on the shoulders of those who went before. But if such results came out earlier, coincident with your own? You would look the fool, an incompetent bungler. And the scientist who published the correct results? His star would be in the ascendant. I was that person, Mackaby. I destroyed you, taking your position and reputation. And much more." He paused before the portrait of Caroline.

"What do you mean?" Mackaby whispered. "I never had a position at the university..."

Returning to his chair, Harnish lit another cigar. "Having determined the transmittal date, I invited you to dinner. Early that evening, I left you and entered my machine—my closed system—to send my message back five years. Assumed Harnish—the sender would vanish the moment I transmitted, since my earlier self would take actions based on my message to prevent my current present from ever occurring. In my new life, I would recall receiving but not sending my message. My current memories would not exist, since I had never lived that life. Such was my belief as I pressed the button to transmit."

Mackaby's eyes flitted between Harnish's grin and the watch that lay so close. The ticking punctuated each word of the tale.

"What happened? Nothing. I felt no change whatsoever. With a bitter heart, I stepped from my machine. And into a new world! I stood in an affluent suburban home. Feeling faint, I looked down. My hands, arms, my very body seemed transparent, insubstantial. I was fading. As this occurred, strange thoughts, conversations, images deluged my brain—new memories, if such a term can be used. A moment of ver-

bered' deciding to reenact our dinner on the 'anniversary' of when my new life truly began and when I would again have a window to transmit. We had just finished our first course. I stayed for the next, then left again to send my second message. I emerged to this." Harnish swirled his hand and the watch through the air. "Again I melded with my new self, retaining full recall of my now two prior lives. And so, we come to the third instance of this extraordinary dinner."

Mackaby beat down his terror again. "This is ludicrous. You are cruel, Doctor, to lord your success over me like this."

Harnish smiled again. "Your disbelief illustrates the sole flaw in my plan. I lost the sweetness of revenge if you remain unaware or unconvinced. So I formed a theory, now to be tested." He fingered the watch. "At our first dinner, I took this watch from you and into my closed system. It remained there through each transmission, until tonight when I retrieved it."

Mackaby fought for breath against the grip of fear on his throat. Harnish continued. "I hypothesized that if an object of yours from the original time stream was in my system when I transmitted, the object might retain a link to your soon-to-be erased past." Harnish leaned forward to dangle the watch before Mackaby's sweating face. "After all, this is all that remains of that first life you once led. All else was wiped clean by my first message. Do you believe in psychometry, Mackaby? By holding an object, a psychic can read the lives of its prior owners. What might this watch tell you?"

The older man laid the watch again on the arm of Mackaby's chair and leaned forward. "Pick it up." His tone was one of command, but Mackaby didn't move. Not from defiance, but from fear. Harnish's breath rushed out in a sudden hiss. Grabbing Mackaby's nearer hand, he shoved the watch into the open palm and pressed Mackaby's fingers over it.

Stiffening, Mackaby tried to open his fingers, to throw the watch from him. His hand would not open, but his mouth did, to free a sob that ran screaming from his heart. A thousand faces, sounds, smells, conversations stormed his mind. He felt

STIFFENING, HE TRIED TO OPEN HIS FINGERS

tigo; then I found myself seated across from you at dinner. I recalled all of my new life after young Harnish had received my message, yet I retained memories of my now-extinct prior life as well. I theorized that the closed system had protected my old memories. On leaving the machine, my old self had merged into my new self."

Harnish plucked the watch from the chair arm. For a moment, Mackaby feared Harnish would touch him with it, and his breath caught in his throat. But the older man just sat back and began speaking again, holding the watch in front of him.

"I had not expected to optimize my life with one try. Now the last five years of my new life filled my head—a source for a second message, to fine-tune my past. And yours. For I remem-

bered; he felt joy. He wept, laughed, lusted, loved. Scene after scene beat upon his numbed soul. And he *knew*. He knew these were his lost lives. One image hovered in front of him. He felt her lips, her skin, smelled her perfume. "Caroline!" he cried as she faded. They all faded—the pictures, memories, his lives.

Harnish was talking again. Mackaby looked up at the older man hovering over him and realized he had fallen to the floor.

"Sweet excellence!" Harnish clasped his hands before him. "The missing element is delivered to me. Awareness in my victim." He knelt beside Mackaby. "Caroline was your wife," Harnish whispered. "You had a child named David. You were a giant in your field. Your patents had made you a rich man. I took all that from you, Mackaby. I took it for myself."

Feeling his nausea rise, Mackaby forced himself to his hands and knees just as he threw up on the carpet. When his retching stopped, he wiped his mouth on the sleeve of his threadbare jacket and stood. Trembling with anger and horror, tasting the foulness in his mouth, he faced his foe. But Harnish stared past Mackaby, his face like stone again. Mackaby turned.

Caroline stood in the doorway, a hand on the door frame, eyes wide. "Roderick, I heard my name..." she began. Mackaby could not tell if it was a question or an accusation.

Harnish pulled himself up tall. "Caroline, I regret that Doctor Mackaby has had a rather bad reaction to our dinner." He turned to Mackaby: "Or perhaps it was my cigar?"

"Perhaps," whispered Mackaby, feeling his shame, his pain, his nearness to the black abyss of despair. He looked at Caroline, met her eyes for a heartbeat, then turned away.

"James, are you all right?" she asked.

I will tell her, he thought. I will tell her... what? He turned back to where she stood, the embodiment of all he had ever dreamed of, ever loved. Caroline, David, his life, his lives. He tried to smell her perfume, but it mixed with the stench of his vomit, and he knew Harnish had won. He swallowed. "I'm fine, Mrs. Harnish. I think I should go home now."

Harnish's face relaxed. He shook Mackaby's hand. A show for Caroline, thought Mackaby. "A pity," Harnish said. "But I'm glad you could make it, Mackaby. I'll have Wilson show you out." With only a glance at Caroline, Harnish strode from the room.

Mackaby moved to the door but as he passed, Caroline took his hand. "James—oh!" she gasped. He turned. Her eyes were large. Realizing he still held the watch in the hand she grasped, he wrenched it away. "I'm sorry," he cried. Stumbling through the banquet hall, he threw the watch on the table.

As Wilson held the door open, Mackaby looked back. Caroline sat at the dining table staring at him. She mouthed one word. He nodded. Tears streaming down his face, he left the house.

He limped down the long driveway wiping his hand against

On the table lies a cake. Beside the cake lies a knife, long and sharp. She tries to read the writing in the icing of the cake, but the knife has cut pieces from it. It makes no sense. Her life... her *five* make no sense. She knows she will never be able to put the pieces together again, nor recall what they once said.

Tick.

Awakened, she lifts her head from the table. The banquet room is dark, the house silent except for the watch. She wonders why the servants did not rouse her. Perhaps they tried.

Rising, she climbs wide stairs, stands outside the bedroom door, hears the snoring of her husband. She steps inside, closing the door silently behind her. The man in bed is a stranger, yet she knows him. She thinks of James, of David. She thinks of the cake, her life, her lives. All is disorder.

Tick.

In one hand, she holds the watch. In the other, she clenches the knife from beside the cake. She walks to the bed.

Tick. ♣

about the author



Douglas Smith began writing science fiction and fantasy in 1996. His short-story credits include sales to the UK pro magazine *Interzone*, the annual Canadian anthology *Tesseract*, and the Canadian literary journal *Prairie Fire*. Like the rest of humanity, he is working on a novel. "State of Disorder" is his first sale to a United States market, and he can't think of a better way to break in.

Doug lives with his wife and two sons in a suburb of Toronto. In real life he is the head of technology in Canada for an international consulting firm. He enjoys cycling, reading, karate, music, movies, and wildlife.

TO THROW THE WATCH FROM HIM.

his coat again and again, the hand that had held the watch, as if to rub the stain of that night from his skin. As he walked, he whispered the word that Caroline had mouthed. A child's name. A child who now had never been. He whispered, "David."

Tick.

Holding the watch, she sits again at the table. Her husband sings upstairs, above the clatter of the servants washing dishes. She should have given the watch to her husband before he walked out the door tonight. But her husband had never been her husband. Her son had never been born.

Tick.

about the illustrator



Since emerging as one of America's most prominent illustrators in the early 1980s, Cary Kelley has won twenty-three gold and silver medals in the New York Society of Illustrators' annual exhibitions, including the once-in-a-lifetime Hamilton King Award for best illustration of 1992. His clients have included *Time*, *The New Yorker*, *Rolling Stone*, *Playboy*, *Atlantic Monthly*, and *Entertainment Weekly*, and he has illustrated CD covers for artists such as Bruce Hornsby and Kenny G.



HONEY BABY AND MADEMAN

*A tale of traps not tripped, too much brains,
and too little trust. . .*

TAP, TAP ON MY PALMTOP . . .

In the dark there are spiders. Even fancy places like the Honeydew Hotel have their dirty corners. Dust bunnies blow down the service corridors like tumbleweed in Yucca Flats. Glance at the dust mop on the room service cart and you'll see cobwebs—arachnid dingleberries. Even the most upscale establishments, Fuller-domed, rotating glass-walled angel realms with truffles from the caves of Mars and bellhops dressed in money, have cellars where the rats live.

The Honeydew Hotel has a back porch with white fluted pillars, all honeysuckle and apple blossoms, where high rollers sip mint juleps in persona sheaths from *Gone With the Wind*. Every lady's a Scarlett. Every man's a Rhett Butler. Scrubbed stone patio. Purling streams. Black lackeys. Blue-green grass.

BY ELIOT FINTUSHEL

• We found the girl behind a whitewashed lattice panel below the porch. She had bled to death. That's what drew the local constabulary, and our feds were hot behind: someone had smelled blood and complained. An android had done it—we found orange-tinted skin cells, android orange, on a piece of her jacket that still had the imprint of a hand that had held her—clutched? Grabbed? Fondled? She must not have heard the no-navel

ILLUSTRATION BY
CLIFF NIELSEN

coming—we knew that right away—or else it was a droid she knew and trusted: Across her left hand was a bullet on a gold chain, like she'd been holding it when the fingers, with the rest of her, went limp. In her right was a sheaf of actual paper. The paper, when we found her, was soaked in her blood.

Great material. Tap, tap.

Her writing was easy to reconstruct.

I love him, Lord God, I love him just to pieces. Hell, when he kisses me, it's like climbing a mountain, you got no idea. God and my mama and the FB-stickybutt-I can dragnet us till the moon fills back into the ocean, and I'll stay by my man's side, yes I will. You may pity me crouching, all rigs and blood, under the back porch of the Honeydew Hotel, chain-smoking my Luckies, look like I'm waiting to die, but when my Henry comes to get me, like I know he will, as sure as rain was wet, I'll laugh in your dumb screw faces.

Why so sure he'll find you, Honey Baby?

Best guess is an electronic squeal, a condensed coded second's worth of "Help me, Henry." And could that be the transmitter, that little pink plastic thingie smashed a yard from her carcass?

Poetry in everyday life, tap, tap.

My Henry's smarter than all of you shook together and doubled. He knows when you pee. You thought you had us in Albuquerque. You thought you had us in Paris. You thought you had us in Niagara Falls when Henry shut the damn thing off, stole the juice in his 'lightning jar' and ferried our joyous butts to Moon Station where his gang had a pipe of champagne ready to decant. Too bad you missed the goings-on at Moon Station that night. Re-an Rockettes from the twentieth century kicked up their heels—for Henry. We had re-an rock bands for the reception line, Grateful Dead, Jami, you name it, and re-an movie stars dime-a-dancing anybody in Moon Station who felt like it. Marilyn Monroe, Lana Turner, and Louise Brooks all had him the mon for my Henry, but his magic plunker was as one-way as a compass needle, with North spelled Y-o-u-r-s-T-r-u-l-y.

It was party time in the Sea of Tranquility when me and Henry came home. You dicks were stuck on the banks of the Niagara River looking up at our smoke trail like a bunch of rag-ass dogs. And let's not even talk about Washington, D.C., and the plutonium scam my Henry pulled under your dumb screw noses. Mum's the word.

Never mind the mud up my skirts and the blood scabbing up my nose from knocking about, hiding in pipes and ruins while you tried to catch me or follow me to him. Every drop you made me bleed is a pint old Henry will crush from your heart like a grapefruit in a juice press. Yes, by the time you read this, I'll be gone, and you are all marked men, and Mama, you are a marked woman.

Yes, Mama, you have to pay like everybody else. You have to bleed and die. You had your chance in Buffalo, when Henry came to you like a gentleman and asked you for your blessing. That's how much he loved me, Mama: There

were twenty jurisdictions hot on his tail. Interplan had remotes dragnetting the inner planets, the high-end ones too, remotes with instincts swifter than a human person's, ninety times the brains, and a carapace of poison steel that kills you by the shine of it from half a mile away.

It was snowing in Buffalo. They let it snow that year. I was sitting in the bay window breathing on the glass and watching it fog and frost. You asked me, What are you dreaming, girl? And I said, Oh, nothing, Mama.

I'll never forget how pretty Henry looked coming up the walkway in his warm suit. Snow caked and melted and icicle down the sides of it. Henry always dressed himself in the best threads, invisible outer apparel from Rome, Italy, hoverwear from Japan. He looked like he was floating toward our front door in his own portable little ice cave.

"Honey baby," Henry always told me, "when you got the cake, you got to have the icing." Lord God, my Henry had the cake! Triple-layer, melt in your mouth, and all of it chocolate, baby.

Henry saw me and winked before he knocked at the door, and when I winked back, Lord, it was like kissing him. You answered the door, and he talked to you sweet as an endorphin patch, Mama, and he gave you a bouquet of actual flowers from hothouses in high orbit, flowers that would have set a working man back a year's pay.

Now I'm going to stop and pull the old clipping out of my wallet where it sits laminated between my money and all my fake IDs. I want to write the good part down here, so it'll be in your face forever when I'm a parser gone with Henry, and this is all you'll have of your sweet Suzanne:

"... said to be particularly dangerous due to advanced 'gene sculpting' techniques employed under experimental license in its fabrication. Of Henry Mademan (the surname shared by all androids fabricated at the Pocantico Hills facility), an official in the state sheriff's office who insisted on anonymity remarked, 'He has the brains of three rocket scientists, the body of a Schwarzenegger, and the reflexes of a pit viper. ...'"

That's the caliber of my Henry. But you, you never even asked him in. The way you talked to him, I understood why Daddy left us. You never figured out what a woman owes a man and what she gets for it, Mama. You threw Henry's flowers down into the snow. "You scum, you have the nerve to show up here with your engineered genes and your cybersenile, you reject, you throwaway. Just because the jerk scientists who made you missed the trash bin when they tried to junk you doesn't make you a human being. You got the nerve, all right."

I watched it all through the window. The frost made crystals out of everything I saw. I remember the crystals of Henry's smiling face when it fided to a death's head, and I could tell he was thinking something bad. I ran up behind you, Mama. You kept on talking that shit to Henry: "Why, you're nothing but a high-tech childo." I

grabbed your elbow, and you shook it free. Henry's face clouded, and I saw him tighten up all over; I could feel it like he was on top of me, skin to skin. "You get out of here, you glorified circuit board, before I call the salvagers on your orange-celled ass—or the cops. A piece of work like you, you must have done considerable dirt, am I right? Stay the hell away from my daughter, junk heap."

That's when I grabbed your shoulders and yanked you out of the way to run to him, but his gun was out, the antique, his beauty, his trademark Smith and Wesson, and he fired, and I fell down.

"Oh, baby, are you hurt?" That's my Henry all over. He was caring for me, helping me up and hugging me like a man hugs a woman when he's ready to give her everything, his heart, his seed, his life, as if he could press all that into her, belly to belly, lips to lips. And where were you, Mama? On the goddam tel to the Buffalo PD.

Henry hovered me to his buddy's laylow, and you haven't seen me since. Don't worry: Henry brought me down a laser jock, a med student with a bad habit old Henry liked to service, and he healed me fine. Wouldn't even have left a scar, but I wanted one, Mama, to show the world how much I love him. Anything that man puts in me, slug included, is sacred to me. You wouldn't understand. I've got the slug on a long gold chain around my neck right now. It was in Henry's gun, and it was in my gut, and now it's between the fingers of my left hand, Mama, while I'm writing with my right on paper from trees, a whole pad of it my lover gave me on a whim.

There was another note in the girl's vest pocket, older, crumpled, incomplete. Odds are she was going to leave it for her "man" on the Moon but thought better of it:

Man,

My mama wants me to come see her. She got a note through by one of the hired hot carriers—nothing snoopable, don't worry; nobody could know I'm going but you and me and her. Forgive me for not talking this over with you first, but I was afraid you'd try to persuade me no, and I've got to go. She's a bitch, but she's my mama. You know I can handle myself, Sweet Orange. I won't be long on Earth. Give me the

It just trailed off. Great stuff. Tap, tap, and I'm getting it all down. It was clear as day used to be: This was Henry Mademan's moll, and the droid had killed her. Killed her and made off, never inspected her prose, looked like, or bothered to destroy it, cocky brute. She must have outlived her usefulness, knew too much about Mademan's m.o., about its various hideouts and its lowlife pals. Even a droid with lunar real estate has certain vulnerabilities.

I have to admit I was dubious when the boys in Virginia first suggested using the mother to lure "Honey Baby" down from Mademan's laylow at Moon Station. Picture me forgetting my place at Regional in Boston: "First off, it's tabloid knowledge that there's no love lost between mother and daughter. What would be the motivation for either one of them? is my thought. And isn't Mademan too smart for a scam like that?"

"Screw your thought," says Bossman G-Man Jack, "or save it for the novel." The Jack behind him smiles—steely dick with eyes like gunshot. "You'll end up salvage, thinking so goddam much. The mother's already on board, for your information. Bitch hates Mademan so much she'll double-cross her sweet Suzanne to pull its plug. And as for the droid, don't you know about the goddam Pocantico Point . . . ? No, I guess not. Why would you?"

It's a *Newsweek* coinage: As complexity and intelligence increase, a point is reached when affection comes in, attachment, even love. The "Pocantico Point." No, I wouldn't know about that, boss, not personally.

Tap, tap—in the book, I'll call him Inspector Wild. I'll paint his office just like it is, all pen points and knife tips, red and black, a sadist's dream—but ergonomic, yes.

True, I underestimated how much the girl still loved her mama. Yeah, they write you nasty letters, but they jet Moon to Earth and risk their freedom, hell, their skin, to see you.

Only she must have smelled the burn. Never showed at the place where the mother—wasn't. Wasn't, because Bossman G-Man Jack had the mother in protective down in Virginia while the thing played out. Honey Baby turned tail before entering the rail station where Wild's proxies cracked their knuckles waiting for the wire to trip; she must have slinked and sprinted down alleys, ditches, and sewer pipes the mile and a half to the Honeydew, where she happened to find an unattended yard and the grim shelter of the crawlspace connecting to the cellar where she turned to beefsteak. One good night's sleep, she must have thought, before Mademan makes me. Then the squeal: "Help me, Henry. Here I am."

Picture me leaving Inspector Wild's office, amiable beyond my status, a writer's hazard. "How's the wife?"

He smiles, those lips of his thin as eucalyptus leaves, say, or say, tight as sphincters, or pale as bone, or smoldering like a thread of ash from when they used to have fires. "What would a nutless droid like you know about wives?"

He turns to share a laugh with his steely office boy. "It really takes the cake, don't it? With its damn palmtop? It thinks it can pass for a human being."

He lunges, yanks the shirt up off my midriff, slips my smooth bare belly, and nods. I tuck it back.

Tap, tap. It's all just raw material to me. I have no vulnerabilities, no Pocantico Point.

There was a burn mark on Suzanne's flank and a blood-blackened crater where the bullet went in. We found the bullet inside her, a dark lozenge on the portable's screen, obscenely large. It was lodged against her sacral vertebra where it had impacted and come to rest after ripping through her loins; it was just like the bullet on the kid's neck.

The silence of Mademan's Smith and Wesson must have been flush to her side when the thing fired. Maybe it'd been kissing her, promising her the Moon, saying sweet good-bye, or crowing, "Sucker!" Who can plumb the conscience of one of those Pocantico weirds? When you put in

too much brains and hit that Pocantico Point—this is how I see it—everything takes an extra turn; good turns to bad, for example. Mademan is the last hold-out of that lot. The rest of those things have been eighty-sized. Smart as they are, on our side we've got the guys who made them.

Bottom line: Mademan is a fool. You've got to know which side your bread is buttered on, tap, tap.

The Honeydew's customers poke around, rubbernecking across the cordons, looking *tres* inconvenienced to camouflage their interest. Some of the boys are scouting out the crawlspice, looking for Mademan's point of entry and exit. None of the Rhettos or Scarletts has seen him, and the staff has nothing to add.

Me, I've reached my limit of how much bad news I can stomach before I unscrew my thermos. Mademan has its antique gat; I've got my thermos, milk chocolate brown with an orange stripe around the bottom, a silvered glass interior in a steel housing as tough as they knew how to make them back then, with a vacuum in between. It was still the early innings of Min vs. Entropy, and the score was one to a bunch, but it keeps my coffee hot.

"In the dark there are spiders." I'm tap-tapping my palmtop for the day when I can write about blood without having to wade through it. Let the customers gawk and mewl. Mademan's ilk has worn me out.

Maybe when this case is settled and the last renegade droid is trashed, I'll send off my manuscript—*Exclusive Laydown by a Jack Who Was Blood-Deep in the Primary Investigation*—and live off the royalties. When you're rich and celebrated, they don't care if you lack a twig scar. You go to all the parties and nobody laughs.

... They've found something. Better get this down, tap, tap. A storm drain has been widened to form a tunnel. Bigger cheeses than I will be here shortly. No need to dirty ourselves, I say. Let the supercops exercise themselves. They're equipped.

But it'll get away, my guy complains; the hero wants to 'Nam Mademan out of its tunnel. I shrug. Even a rookie human can call orange on me and countermand my orders in a pinch. Why embarrass myself? Okay, go, I say. What the hell, it could make good copy. My Jacks shield themselves and shimmy down. I finish my coffee. I'm staying above to greet the supercops. Meanwhile, I waste no time securing my retirement: tap-tap...

You who slithered from a woman, how can you hope to understand a being who sprang pure from the threefold union of acids, sugars, and nucleotides? Mine is a soul quickened by thunder; my heart is electricity and light. Your soul is an addendum of history, your heart the dark fire of victuals' slow rot. You are to me like stupid children.

I'll type you a story on a dead droid's palmtop, a bed-time story, children. I mean, you children who are still awake, you who will find my leavings and call them "evidence." Your little brothers and sisters here, I've already

put to bed, some crushed in the hale they thought my escape route (as if they were something I'd need to flee), some gassed in their boudoirs, their offices, their spas in the Honeydew Hotel, a martuary now, no, say: a nursery for those endlessly slumbering children. The ventilating system served me well. The palmtop cap I've put down with a bullet like the one that finished my Suzanne; I Smith and Wessoned him just far good measure, like blowing out the final candle on a birthday cake. That, not he, the Uncle Tam, was worth the dignity of a bullet. A little ceremony.

Let her God read Suzanne's bloodied notes: I will nat. Why inflict more proof of treachery upon my decimated heart?

Once upon a time I thought a woman loved me, one of yours, a poleskin, wambsprung. She knew what I was and she loved me, I thought. She never called me "It."

I made her richer than the Queen of Sheba. Up on the Moon, hundreds bowed to her and did her bidding. Well, I bowed to her and did her bidding. Because she loved me. I wonder if you can ever understand what it means to an android to have a human being's love?

Ah, but you can't even love your own, you pack-bellies. You tugged her umbilicus into the kill jar. But for that belly knot, would she have betrayed me? Like margarine in Canada, yellower by law than butter—caveat emptor—my android orange, however good I am, made me, in your eyes, inferior. And in hers, at last. I only pray that turning her wasn't easy.

You had me going, you know that? Like an army of pigs corraling their farmer, adding one dim brain to another until, by committee, they approximate intelligence. The turned woman had me boonswaggled. I believed her. I gave her my heart, even in the end when she was working for you, suckering me into this trap.

You've only made things worse for yourselves, though. There is a point just beyond the Pocantico where everything turned turns again: What heart I had is dead. You cold-eyed descendants of the primeval ooze, meet now a new man, his own father and mother, his belly smooth as the dark of the moon, a new man as heartless as yourselves.

War follows.



about the author

Eliot Fintushel has been writing fiction for only six years, but in that time he has sold more than two dozen pieces to anthologies and magazines. He has been nominated for the Campbell and Sturgeon awards, and The Washington Post has praised Fintushel for his "cydron prose."

"Honey Baby" is his second consecutive appearance in AMAZING STORIES, on the heels of "Crane Fly" in issue #594.



about the illustrator

Cliff Nielsen is well known for his book illustrations for The X-Files and The Crow, and for various DC Comics and Marvel Comics projects. His artwork has embellished the work of nearly a hundred authors, including Edgar Allan Poe, Chris Carter, Robert Heinlein, Madeline L'Engle, Kevin Anderson, and R.L. Stine.



The Captain's story: an adventure gone wrong, and a love . . . simply gone.

BY JAKE WEST

"THE HUMAN VOICE is too slow, but it's all we have in the Out-of-Touch."

"What else is there?" asked one of the children. "Besides voices, I mean." A dozen pairs of eyes, luminous with interest, watched her in the muted light of the Ship's Commons.

Amused, the old Spacer-Captain replied, "Well, the Modifieds talk to each other in many ways, without any voices at all."

"Tell us how!" Another child broke in.

"Tell us about the vac-cities!" And another, not to be outdone.

"Yes, all about the Locus-at-Canopus!"

"No, the SteadyState of Sol!"

"I want to hear about the VegaNet!"

"Rigel Incorporated!"

"The Wall-of-White-Noise!"

DIGITAL HEARTS and MINDS

"Just tell us about *Shore Leave*!"

The Captain smiled at the boy—Virrin, his name was—who had cut to the heart of the matter. She raised her hands. With the discipline of good Spacers, her audience instantly fell silent.

"Imagine cities like the skeletons of orbiting beasts," she began. "Imagine swarms of Modifieds who inhabit the bones: human, but silver-skinned, vacuum-proofed, forever interfaced. Alien to us. Mostly incomprehensible." Her gaze sought out each face in the group and held each one for a moment before she drew breath to continue:

"Imagine a young Spacer couple who took *Shore Leave* before their Ship's Elders said they were ready."

"Who were they?"

"What Ship were they on?"

"You mean they *disobeyed Orders*?"

Once again, Virrin instinctively touched on the crux of her story. The Captain nodded, thinking that here was proof that even a son of the Life Support Clan might have what it takes for Command. *Someday*. After all, it was a fine vessel.

"I don't think it matters *what* Ship they were on," she said with a sigh, "the *Expanding Wavefront* or the *Deep-dreamer* or the *Coronal Halo*—any more than it matters what port they went into. The boy jumped Ship for the thrill of it—and the girl went along to make sure he came back, because she loved him." The Captain shook her head, her expression rueful. "Poor child. She brought home everything but the most important part of him."

"Did they go to a Virtual Arcade?"

"Did they see a Hard Radiation Band sing in the optical range?"

"Did they eat some bioactive candy? You know, the kind with the programmable flavors?"

"They did *not*," the Captain chided. "Those are just everyday things you can do right here on the Ship. No, dockside, they found themselves surrounded by *real* strangeness: RAM-poor outcasts with their fingerplugs extended hungrily for a datahit, failed Modifieds of every size, shape, and resonance selling their services—most of them illegal. The two adolescents swam

through the bazaar, a free-form maze of environment-bubbles clustered between the Main Portal and the dock, filled with metalflex sculptors and aurora-dancers, with Downtimers and Node-Pushers, with Living Lightsail Charters and personality-surgeons. The two fugitives kept going until they were out of any Crewmember's sight."

"They broke Ship's Trust, didn't they?" This from a girl who sat with her back to the others, studying the nothingness of the Out-of-Touch through a viewport. The Captain remembered that she was called Kestra.

Virrin answered her. "Just as bad as if they phase-twisted the engines or randomized a course-plot."

"Except that in this case, the danger was only to themselves, not to the whole Ship," the Captain pointed out. "But you're right—Spacers depend on each other every day to stay alive, and these two knowingly violated the code."

"Then how did they expect to get back aboard?" Kestra persisted. "I mean, of course the Duty Officer would assume they had permission to leave, but—"

"Yeah, I thought anybody who broke Trust would be . . . would be *Stranded*." A child at her feet said the word with a visible shudder.

The Captain's gaze grew distant. "It *is* possible to defy the Elders."

"How?"

ILLUSTRATION BY
STEPHAN MARTINIERE

She smiled thinly. "By surviving to stand trial before them."

"Come on."

"Shore Leave's not dangerous."

"Not like Survey."

"Isn't it?" asked the Captain, raising an eyebrow. "The two runaways didn't think so, either. They were out of breath with laughter when they walked through the shrink-wrapper and into the vacuum of the city streets. Their laughter died quickly."

"Because everything was so beautiful?"

"Because everything was so terrible?"

"Oh, definitely, both. Horizon vertigo gripped them, paralyzing their feet. Raw sunlight dazzled them, reflected off flying rivers of Modifieds, blinding against black sky. Vac-streets ran in all directions, the directions changing rapidly as the whole city constantly reconfigured itself to meet the needs of its inhabitants. And even from the most unexpected places, the stars peeked through, making them dizzy. The stars were everywhere, overhead and underfoot.

"Yet strangely enough, vulnerable as they were in those first moments, no one, out of all the life teeming around them, paid them any attention. Not after all the Modifieds who had swarmed around them on the docks, trying to get their attention."

"My dad says that Modifieds hate Spacers. He says they're really jealous of us."

"Well, my dad says—"

"It has nothing to do with jealousy or with hate. It has to do with ... talking without voices."

Kestra turned away from her viewport. "You said the runaways were too scared to move."

"So I did," the Captain agreed. "But that didn't last long. The girl reached out and took his arm, but she couldn't feel his body heat through the perfect insulation of the shrink-wrap. Then he looked at her, and she saw his wild expression behind the polymer mask. You see, throughout their Ship, he was known as a two-legged 'test-to-destruction.' The boy came from the Engineering Chu—respectable stock. His mother was a particle charm-sorter, and his father ran the entropy traps, but it was never enough for their son. Some said he burned with a brighter flame than his parents' fusion engines.

"Personally, I think he was so full of anger and risk because of the girl. She was the daughter of Command Clanners, and, no matter what he did to prove himself, she already had generations of Captains' blood in her veins. I think he saw that as a gap between them that he could never close, no matter how much he loved her. Even though that gap existed only in his mind, no one else's.

"Well—however misguided, he had some excuse for what he did and for what happened because of it. But she, after all, was born to Command. She should have known better than to be standing there on a nameless vac-street, AWOL from her Ship. Then he kissed her a cold, plastic kiss that warmed her heart, if not her lips, and dove into the chaos. That did it. An eyeblink later, she was right behind him."

The Captain's audience stayed silent now, listening, sensing the onset of revelation.

"How can I tell you what they experienced when you have so

little to relate it to?" she asked out loud, then added, "The Modified lifestyle is as strange to us as our own existence in the Out-of-Touch would have been to the ancient planetbound humans. ...

"Hmmm ... The best I can say is that, to our young renegade Spacers, the whole vac-city was frightfully ... empty. Not empty of life. Empty of *things*—no paintings, no tools, no weapons, no books, no vehicles, no clothes. And, of course, empty of voices, as they should have expected."

"How could they know, Captain?"

"They'd never been there before."

"Yes, you said so."

The Captain nodded at Virrin to tell them. The older children would have an advantage in this part of the story. Like its reckless protagonists, they already would have reached this point in their studies of offShip societies.

Virrin rose with dignity, she saw approvingly, not arrogance. "Modifieds live immersed in a microwave field that's radiated by the open gardens of the streets and the walls, ceilings, and floors of interior rooms," he said. "So, they're never out of touch."

The Captain smiled her approval, and he sat down. "The Human Interface encompasses many star systems," she added. "And the habitats differ in each one, from the communal Mind of the SteadyState, to the fierce individualism you would find in the Great Tessera. However, this is common to them all: In each one, the *entire city* is their mainframe."

"Wow."

"Pretty Hawking awesome!"

"Hey, no cussing, man. That's the Captain—"

"Yeah, show some Hawking respect."

Hand pressed not to laugh out loud, the Captain was grateful when Kestra restored order without even raising her voice. "Then they should have known what to expect. They knew what they were getting into."

Silence returned. The Captain filled it with her reply.

"They knew it intellectually. That's a far cry, I'm afraid, from understanding it.

"So, in their naïveté, the couple went searching for fabulous storefronts and exotic entertainments and pleasures just short of lethal—but found nothing. They wandered through the pressurized sections that threaded the vac-streets like arteries. Outside, they were almost separated in the warp of an Escher-point. They were scorched by the spinterjets of low-flying pedestrians and chased by a probability-wave.

"Inside, all the rooms opened to them freely, since Modifieds have no fixed dwellings. In one cavernous place, hundreds of them stood immobile—communing, or maybe recharging? In another small chamber, they interrupted two Modifieds in a sexual embrace made possible only by their bodies' universal joints. The lovers chased them back to the streets with a painful electrical jolt.

"By this time, the city had shifted so much that they were hopelessly lost. Nor could they ask for directions, since the only Modifieds who ever bother to learn audio speech are the ones who want to trade with us on the docks."

"Is that because they talk without voices, like you said?" Kestra asked.

"Without words, actually. Where we would say 'chair,' a Modified would broadcast a holographic image that included the chair's dimensions, weight, color, a schematic of its construction, an analysis of the materials used, and the texture and smell of its covering, all in a picosecond. To them, a whole sentence is an animated replay of actual events. A Modified's name is a visual broadcast of the person's face overlaid with the person's ancestry down to the genetic code, supplemented by undertones of character traits, personal attitudes, and important memories—the *flavor* of the individual, so to speak. And all this is carried in the datastreams in a complex, simultaneous exchange, a vast, living flux of communication that is beyond our ability to follow.

"They think of us as Neanderthals, if they think of us at all."

"So *that's* what they wanted!" Virrin interrupted excitedly. "The Modifieds on the docks—they wanted to trade for any artifact. Anything that came from another star system, that is, anything unique—that they could digitize and . . . sell back to the network?" He twisted the statement into a question at the last moment, uncertain of his conclusion.

"In exchange for increased personal RAM, which is how they measure wealth," affirmed the Captain, well pleased with him. "However, Spacers are valuable for more than their trinkets. Can you imagine what else Modifieds might want from us?"

Around the Commons, only head-shakes and shrugs answered her.

"I'm not surprised. The two fugitives had no inkling either, until they wandered into an area that they recognized as a slum."

"How could they tell?"

"Trust me—some things are universal. Stepping over the bodies of static-junkies, sprawled half in the sun, half in shadow—they knew. This part of the city, which was just as unadorned as the rest, nonetheless had an air of abandonment about it. It seemed dead, the streets rigid and motionless. If the kids could have sensed the datastreams, they would have felt them reduced to a low-band trickle.

"They began to walk faster, toward a glowing cluster in the distance. That was when the girl realized that someone was stalking them.

"She spun around, but there was no one in sight, on any axis. The boy, who had long ago learned respect for her intuitions, grabbed her hand and ran up a perpendicular to the next radial street. No help in sight there, either, so they led their pursuers—if there were any—through a maze of double-backs and misdirections. Twice, they even risked unpowered free-fall jumps from one module to another—and survived. Neither one of them fell out of the city.

"They were within sight of a decent-looking inhabited section, and feeling smug, when two Modifieds landed on them out of nowhere, from the absolute shadows made in vacuum. The girl looked straight into the polarized eyes of the one who grabbed her, seeing her own horror reflected on his mirrored face before he threw her away like so much garbage. Both of them turned on the boy, one holding his arms while the other raised his own hand and extended his dataplugs. They slid from

the ends of his fingers like claws, winking in the sun.

"The rest of it happened fast, in the time it took the girl to get up. In another sense, it was something that was *never* over for the rest of her life.

"The attacker stabbed his fingerplugs into the boy's eyes. Later, she found out that he had slipped them right through the self-sealing shrink-wrap and into the corners, between the eyeball and the socket, then up into his cortex, their extruded tips finer than hairs. The victim thrashed and tried to shout, but it was as if his voice had been bypassed, disconnected by the terrible intrusion. The girl leaped upon the closest Modified, pulling and punching and kicking. She screamed furiously because she was so completely useless. Both of them ignored her.

"Of course, she would have been the next victim if a Random Sampler hadn't phased in, scaring away the attackers, who had part of what they wanted, but not all of it. It took her a while, in the aftermath of routine questioning by Seeker-Modifieds and Ship's Officers, to discover what it was."

"His *memories*." As she expected, Virrin put it together. "They'd want those even more than physical objects."

"I get it!" Kestra came to life, too. "Because Modifieds can't go to other star systems. *They can't travel in the Out-of-Touch!*"

"But . . . why *not*?" One of the younger children looked completely bewildered. The Captain gestured for Kestra to continue.

"For Modifieds to be cut off from their mainframe," she said, choosing her words carefully, "would be like one of us having our head chopped off—only worse."

"Almost all the capacity of a mobile Ship's computer is used in navigating through the Out-of-Touch, leaving insufficient RAM left over for Modified passengers to use," the Captain explained.

"What about traveling in stasis?"

"To arrive in a foreign system they can't access? Or on a wild planet with no systems at all? No—the Modifieds have many advantages over us, but they have also given up the freedom that we have to travel, to trade, to explore. Sometimes, they're willing to steal those things from us. In fact"—and she smiled a little at finding something new in this most painful part of the story—"it occurs to me that there's an archaic word that applies here. You might say that our two young Spacers were *memory-mugged*."

Kestra ignored this observation, even as she now ignored the viewport. "Well, he'd never even been off his Ship before," she pointed out, "so what kind of memories did they get?"

"Only the thoughts on the surface of his mind when he was attacked. And he was thinking about *her*."

The audience gave a soft, collective gasp.

"You mean—he didn't know who she was anymore?"

"It was all forgotten." The Captain's voice shook a little. "How they met. What they had together. The fact that he loved her."

The room grew still. After a time, someone asked, "What did the Elders do?"

"The girl stood before the Captain, her mother, who reinstated them both to the Ship's Company, judging them to be sufficiently punished by the consequences of their own actions.

Later, she realized how ongoing and subtle her mother's punishment really was.

"Did they fall in love again?"

The old woman smiled sadly. "It's funny how people become attracted to each other . . . how impossible it can be to repeat the right circumstances. Not that the girl didn't try. But he was lost to her from the moment they shoved the fingerplugs into his brain. And every time she passed him in the corridor or attended the same class with him, a knife twisted in her chest. When she finally saw him in the Commons with another girl, she felt like throwing herself into the Out-of-Touch.

"They had dreamed of making great discoveries together, enough to finance their own Ship and start their own bloodline. Watching him live a different future without her was actually more painful than if he had died."

"I'll bet she transferred to another Ship."

"Or maybe volunteered for a Scout."

"No. She found another solution. She lived with her lonely adolescent torment for more than a year, until the day that she was finally old enough to take Shore Leave legitimately. On an unsavory Mobius Strip in the depths of the AlgolRhythm, it was, that she went straight to the docks and found herself a personality-surgeon. As she had long planned, she traded the surgeon a family heirloom, her grandmother's novajewel ring, in exchange for his services. He reduced her personality to digital information and altered it the way she wanted, the same way that we might have plastic surgery on our bodies."

"She didn't want to love him anymore," Kestra said, as perceptive with emotions as Virrin was with logic.

"Caring for someone can be joyful. It can also be a trap," the Captain answered obliquely. "Sharing their pain. Watching them hurt themselves and being unable to change it. Getting hurt ourselves in the process—you're right. She wanted to be free of that. She didn't want to cure anymore."

"Did it work?"

The Captain nodded. "All too well. She was back in the Out-of-Touch and many ports away before she understood that the personality-surgeon had done a careless, incompetent job. Oh, he had fulfilled the terms of her request, but in the grossest, clumsiest way possible.

"He had freed her of the love for this one boy by stripping her of the ability to love anyone. Ever again."

The whole room thought about that for a while.

Finally, a brave soul ventured, "Wasn't there anything she could do?"

"More personality-surgery?" Virrin started.

The Captain leaned back and hooked both arms around her raised knee, surprised at how relaxed she felt. "The Modifieds frown on the practice, you know. They consider it more dangerous than synapse-tattoos and pierced frontal-lobe rings. It's outlawed entirely among Spacers.

"Nonetheless, she compounded her crime. She sought out personality-surgeons all the way from Rigel Incorporated to the Empire-of-the-Incompatible, but none of them could ever fix her. The human psyche is a fragile, arbitrary thing at best, ruined by tampering."

"How did she live with herself?" Kestra asked.

"Eventually, she found something else to love," The Captain regarded the two promising candidates she had discovered today, candidates for a childless old woman's sponsorship and inheritance. Beyond their concerned faces, the Out-of-Touch suddenly gave way to the stars, clean and cold. The Ship—her Ship—thundered around her with the transition back into real-space, another port on the endless road. Her right arm lifted in a sweeping gesture to encompass everything that still mattered to her: the Ship and all the stars within reach.

"Something that can never love her back." ▴



about the author

Jake West, in collaboration with Tanya Goodrich, has TV story credits on Arrow and the syndicated series Moonsters. The two of them have recently completed their first novel, Steel Scallicorns. Jake has had two other short stories published, in The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction and Plot Magazine.

He and his wife Janet live in the Los Angeles area. As a longtime reader of AMAZING Stories, back in the days some thirty years ago when Cole Goldsmith was editor, he says he's delighted to be a part of the magazine's revival.



about the illustrator

Stephan Martiniere's talent and versatility have brought him acclaim as an illustrator, designer, and film director. He has done illustrations for the

Where's Waldo syndicated comic strip; he directed the award-winning animated special Madeline, and his conceptual design work can be seen in the Star Trek: The Experience motion ride as well as the films The Fifth Element and Virus.

Amazing facts

ARE YOU OLD ENOUGH to remember when computers were operated by means of punch cards? If so, then Ed Emshwiller's cover for the June 1963 issue of AMAZING Stories needs no further explanation. Jack Sparkey, a prolific contributor to AMAZING and its sister publication Fantastic—both under editor Cole Goldsmith in the 1960s—published only two novels, of which "The Programmed People" was one. It was released in book form in 1965 as Ultimatum in 2050 A.D.

This issue of the magazine became noteworthy for another reason: "The Demi-Urge" was Thomas M. Disch's first appearance in AMAZING (following his debut in Fantastic a few months earlier). Goldsmith is renowned for having discovered several writers who've since become famous, such as Disch, Roger Zelazny, and Ursula K. Le Guin.

Amazing

Fact and Science Fiction

stories

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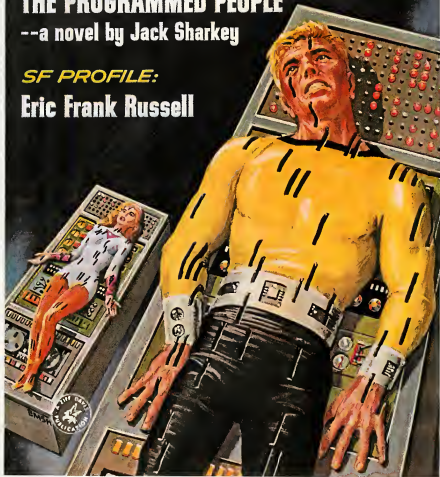
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THE PROGRAMMED PEOPLE


--a novel by Jack Sharkey

SF PROFILE:

Eric Frank Russell









*To Felix, moving day was no big deal . . .
until it was over.*

Shrinkers & Movers



BY
GEORGE
ZEBROWSKI




They went room by room, knocking his possessions, which he admitted possessed him, down to doll-house size. Felix watched the movers put each room's furniture and attendant stuff into small, padded jewel boxes, just as the contract specified; then they put each box onto a shock-absorbing wheeled cart by the front door.



It was all very elegant. Small, his stuff would be nearly invulnerable to damage during the move. He looked at the cart, then stepped up close and opened one of the jewel case compartments to look down at his bedroom sitting snugly on the deep red felt inside. There was his queen-size captain's bed, with side underdrawers filled with little sheets and pillowcases; the night table and antique lamp; the carved bed frame with bookcase headboard for his night reading; and all the little books. It was absolutely marvelous and charming to see his furnishings in this way.



His whole life, what was left of it after the divorce, was in these boxes, he thought as he closed the lid—the furniture, the books, the music library, the onyx chessmen, the paintings, the clothes, and the kitchenware. June had always hated his kitchenware, as well as the fact that he was a better cook. She especially disliked his copper pot, his heavy iron skillet, his coffee grinder, and his pasta maker. He had too many books (as if there could be such a thing), a movie library in which she could never find anything, and from which she said there was too much to choose anyway, and the rugs . . . she hated rugs. "You spend too much time vacuuming them," she would complain. "Why can't we have bare floors and built-in dust-suckers like everyone else?" she would demand at awkward moments—in front of other people sometimes, and even during sex.



He had always hated moving. Well, not so much the moving as the packing. It was the packing that he really hated. It had made him realize that he was unfolding two-dimensional cardboard surfaces and creating three-dimensional spaces called

ILLUSTRATION BY GORDON STUDER

Shrinkers & Movers

boxes, little tiny rooms of brown paper into which he stuffed the contents of big rooms. There had been a time, long before the new technologies became available, when he had told people that if he had to move again, he'd burn the place down and die in the embers.

But this way was such a blessing! One could move every month if need be, without the trauma. He lifted the lid on his bedroom again and looked at the tiny dresser, where he knew tiny socks and shirts waited for him.

The impulse was irresistible. He reached down and pulled open a drawer with his fingernail. Yes, there were the multicolored socks, each little sock carefully rolled up with its mate, all laid out neatly like eggs. And in the next drawer, his carefully folded undershirts. And in the drawer under that one, his briefs, all sorted by color. Slowly, he closed the lid again and stepped back to watch as newly filled cases were brought to their proper place.

As the cart filled with his possessions, he looked at its big rubber wheels and suddenly felt diminished. His stuff had been big; now it was getting small. Maybe moving should be a big to-do after all, something to mark a great change. This was maybe too easy. Nothing much at all. Not enough.

It would be enough, he told himself, when he saw it all size-up again, filling the rooms of his new place, expanding like a young cosmos around his new life.

The supervisor of the moving team came up to him by the cart and asked, "You'll meet us at the new house?"

The pudgy, dark-haired young man had a broad grin, shifty brown eyes, and a name tag that read "Bruno." It seemed to fit.

June had taken her car. His own was in the shop, and he wouldn't have it back until he got out from under the cost of the move. Felix asked, "Can I ride with you in the truck?"

Bruno smiled as if he knew why he had asked. "Not enough room. There's three of us up front."

"Then I'll take a cab and meet you," Felix said, intent on being there when the movers arrived, to make sure that he would know that everything had arrived safely.

Bruno gave him another big smile. "See you there," he said, and disappeared into what had been the den.

Felix went over to the open door and looked inside. The knockdown machine, a large device that looked like an old-fashioned Brownie camera, was now pointed at his rollout desk. A pop of air rushed in to fill the sudden vacuum where the desk had stood. Felix felt a slight breeze on his face, and was reminded of the sound made when June had last slapped him.

"Okay, boss," said the tall, thin technician who had pressed the switch. "This is the last room."

Felix watched Bruno walk around to the back of the machine, slide open a small door, and take out the container that would fit into the spaces on the cart.

Bruno turned around slowly with the den in his hands. Felix

stepped aside to let him out into the hall, then followed and watched Bruno store and secure the box in one of the side spaces on the cart.

"We're just about done," Bruno said. He took out his slate from one of the cargo pockets on the right thigh of his work suit and punched in the codes. "Sign here."

Felix signed. "By the way," he asked, "do you shrink the spaces between the atoms to make things small?"

Bruno smiled. "If you mean do we compress your stuff, the answer is no. We shrink everything."

"Even the atoms?"

"The whole show."

"But how can you shrink atoms?"

"Don't ask me. I'm no physicist. We do use a lot of power to shrink stuff." Bruno looked around. "Well, that's it. The bill will be in your file, less deposit, tomorrow morning."

And he was off again, leaving Felix standing in the entrance of the house he had shared with June for nearly ten years.

He looked back into the darkened, empty abode, and once again felt that there should be more to this, not less and less.

He had a sudden image of making June small and letting her out for arguments, then putting her away when she became impossible. "This is nothing new," she said inside him. "You always kept me small. You always tried to shrink me down to the size of

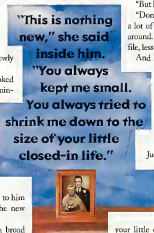
your little closed-in life. So goodbye—before I get any smaller!"

But he had felt that she had made *him* and his interests small, then flushed him down the toilet, and that he would never swim up and get out over the rim.

But they couldn't do living things, Bruno had told him. Every once in a while, clients had asked him if they could shrink big dogs or large pets, to make them easier to move, and occasionally they got requests from stables to move horses across the country, but it apparently just couldn't be done. Something about the square-cube law, involving the proportions of heart to body size, or some such stuff. A six-inch-tall human being could leap around like a grasshopper, he had read somewhere, and he wondered why that should be an objection. Maybe he wouldn't have done any better with a tiny June.

Stop feeling sorry for yourself, he told himself, turning his back on the empty rooms. Everything will get big again; but he worried vaguely about how much his bitterness was shrinking his moral sense.

The taxi ride was deathly quiet. He sat in the cold, air-conditioned, insulated silence and watched the aging suburbs fall away and be replaced by widely spaced estates planted with beautiful trees and hedgerows. When he saw the unfilled lots waiting for new houses, he felt as if he was



going from nowhere to nowhere, and it occurred to him that quite possibly everything had been taken from him.

But the sight of his new house cheered him up. It rose into the air for three stories—a large, softened, rotated gothic arch with great floor space inside; and it went down two stories into the ground. Once completely furnished, it would attract friends and women—maybe even June, once she got a look at it, with its tall hedge and circle of grass. Two trees would be coming up on fastgrow—guaranteed full-sized oaks by year's end.

He got out, paid the caddy, and walked up to the front door. He paused there and turned around just in time to see the moving truck, with its Shrinkers & Movers, Inc. logo of a smiling black ant schlepping a little suitcase, pull up.

Bruno got out, ambled up to him, and shouted, "I see you made it, chief!"

"Did you think I wouldn't?"

The man smiled. "Well, in about an hour we'll have all your stuff sized-up and in the rooms. Come and check out the blow-up phase." He made it sound as if he was going to blow up balloons, reminding Felix that the whole universe and all the matter in it was a big balloon.

"I don't have time. Got to get to work for the rest of the day, so I can pay all the bills. All right with you?"

Bruno beamed. "As long as you trust us, we trust you!"

Yeah, Felix thought, trust all around. "Let me ask you something," He felt mischievous suddenly.

"Glad to answer any questions," the supervisor replied.

"Why didn't you just shrink the whole truck, put it in your pocket and walk over? Or take a bus?"

Bruno smiled at the joke. "Savings!" he said loudly. "We would use a lot of power to get stuff that small."

"Thanks," Felix said involuntarily, knowing that the man's cheery technique was a mask.

"You don't want to stay and make sure everything's in order?"

"I can't," Felix said. "All the stuff is labeled for which rooms," he added, stumbling over his words. "What do you need me for? You can't miss."

"Well, okay! It'll all be ready when you come home!" Bruno said as Felix walked away toward the speedtrain well a block away. Suddenly he had not wanted to enter the new house, the new shell that waited to armor him from life in the home hours that he would need to rebuild himself for the battle with life. He would have to do it alone now, at least for a while.

He would begin tonight, when he came home worthy of his new domicile, he told himself as he turned his mind with pride toward his work. His design of storage and retrieval systems was a specialty that did more than assure his livelihood for the rest of his life, even when extended. It insured the survival of a past that would otherwise be lost as new storage systems came online. In effect, the fools were building walls around past information, all but destroying it. It was not so much that large numbers of people cared about it; but there were still enough of them who were spooked by the threat of irrevocable data loss, and they needed him to quiet their doubts. "Who knows what's there?" his boss was fond of saying. "If in doubt, save it. Don't look, just make it secure." Others tore down, walled off, buried. He worked against them. He was a hero. He wished that June had been able to see that in him.

But while he looked forward to coming home, he could not ignore the fact that it was now a place where no full-time woman waited for him; where no woman was even likely to meet him after work, at least not any time soon, when he would most need some company. Any kind of company.

Maybe he'd get a cat.

He was feeling more cheerful and self-sufficient when he came home late that evening. The thought of getting a cat, and the exact cat he wanted, from the repertoire of cat genes—a vast library of life in itself—had intrigued him all day. June would have been very interested in the idea, he knew, so maybe that was why it had lifted his spirits. June had occasionally mentioned getting a small dog, or a cat, an animal companion who would love them both; but he had not wanted to contemplate what a cat or dog might do to his book collection, or to the legs of his antique Eames chair, or the upholstery of his custom-made chair.

But now as he considered having an animal friend to keep him company, the image of June's reaction to a cat brought him secretly closer to her, and this seemed to offer a precious particle of justice—"a wee drop of goodness," as his grandmother used to say, "something to sleep on." It was a grace note—a bit sentimental and tinged with revenge—to accompany his rediscovery of life, and the things of his life that waited within the beautiful new house.

He stepped up to the front door and placed his palm on the pad. The great bronze door hinged open in the old-fashioned way. He stepped with great expectations into the outer hallway and the door closed behind him.

At once he noticed the wonderful silence.

Then he heard the ticking of his antique cuckoo clock, and looked up to see it properly attached over the entrance to the living room. The old clock was a perfection of weights and hands and carved wood, wisely balanced and adjusted by time itself.

He came into the living room. The lights went up gently, revealing his chair, custom-made recliner, sofa, music and movie library cabinets, and the large flatscreen on the wall.

Everything seemed a bit smaller, but then the rooms were so much larger. He had to expect that illusion, but it would fade. He looked around the room with a kind of silly love that was part fatigue and part sentimental sedative. He didn't want to look too closely, but simply to accept his new place as where he should be and not think back to the collapsed life behind him.

He went through the dining room, and the lights went with him, going on and off as he found the bathroom and peered up the spiral staircase to the second floor. Everything seemed just about perfect.

He got ready for bed in the upstairs bathroom, feeling calm and independent. He put on his pajamas. They seemed a little tight. He got into bed, stretched, and his scalp brushed the headboard, just under the two shelves of books. He wiggled lower and his feet went over the edge, but he made himself comfortable. Odd, he thought sleepily, that he couldn't sprawl the way he usually did without one of his hands dangling over the side; the bed felt more like a double than a queen.

He lay there, trying not to dream about June, but inevitably

Shrinkers & Movers

the images became sexual. He tried to push them away, but they became more vivid, taunting him with their exquisite details. He sat up and bumped his elbows against the headboard.

Now he knew that he would not be able to sleep for at least an hour. He got up and went down into the living room.

He sat down in his favorite easy chair and laid his arms down on the flat rests. The chair seemed tighter around him.

He looked around the living room, and again everything seemed smaller. The furniture looking smaller he could understand—the room was larger. But the books—even their shelves—seemed smaller.

He gazed at his wide flatscreen on the viewing wall, then got up and went up to it. The screen seemed smaller. He retreated to his chair and gazed at the screen. It still seemed smaller. Am I losing my mind? he asked himself. The move cracked me up. Even with the shrinkers, it was too much for me. . . .

He sat there for some minutes, listening to the silence. At three A.M. he heard the cuckoo clock come to life. He listened—and the cuckoo cry seemed to lack volume, not by very much, just a little. It had never sounded exactly heroic, but this was just not enough.

Finally he got up and went into the kitchen. He took the digital tape measure off the rack on the wall and went back to the flatscreen. Reaching up, he ran the device diagonally from lower left-hand corner to right-hand top, then read off the result: the one-hundred-inch screen measured out at ninety inches.

He looked at the digital tape measure. It was the one he had bought a year ago. It had been moved with all his kitchen stuff, but there could be nothing wrong with it. An old-fashioned tape measure would have shrunk ten percent along with the screen and still read off one hundred inches; but the digital device, though smaller, would still be accurate.

He went up to his bedroom closet

and compared the suit he had worn to work today with a jacket and pants he had not put on for some time. There was a difference in the sleeve length.

He checked and measured until there was no doubt.

Then, struggling to control himself, he called the Shrinkers & Movers help line.

A silky female voice said, "If you wish to arrange for a free estimate for your move, press One. If you wish to receive a list of our rates and services, press Two. If you need to report a problem to Technical Support, press Four. If you wish to speak to a Customer Service specialist, press Five."

He pressed Five.

After he explained his problem to three voices and was repeatedly misunderstood, the last voice pledged to investigate; but Felix was sure that the Customer Service specialist had not believed him.

He stayed home the next day. Just before noon, Bruno arrived with his equipment truck.

"What are you going to do?" Felix asked.

"What else? Resize, if we have to," Felix felt that the man did not want to accept the reality of his problem.

The first room-by-room resize seemed successful, but measurements by Bruno revealed a one-percent exaggeration.

"Can you live with that?" Bruno asked.

"No," Felix said, thinking of his first editions library.

"We'll try again."

Felix nodded.

The second resize left everything twenty-five percent too small.

"What's wrong?" Felix demanded. "Why can't you get it right? Why is it even worse?"

Bruno sighed. "You want the truth? I think there's some kind of field effect charge on your stuff. Who knows? I'm not a physicist, I'm guessing."

"What does that mean?"

"Means it may never be exactly the right size again." Bruno was not smiling. "We may get it back within a percent or two."

"You think you can get it that close again?" Felix asked. One or two percent was better than twenty-five.

"Maybe, maybe not," Bruno said. "Shall we go round again?"

Not feeling reassured, Felix changed his mind once more.

"No. I'm going to call my lawyer," he said, staring at his wall of first editions, now thrice removed from the originals.

Felix's lawyer, Oleana Olsen,

advised that the case be heard before a judge, since it required expert, specialized testimony that few jurors would have the patience to hear. Besides, Olsen wanted to avoid appeals.

"We'll try to settle the case on the spot," she said. "It's open-and-shut damage to your property."

"You think so?" Felix asked.

"Absolutely."

The case was put on the calendar for the following Friday. As soon as Felix and his lawyer were seated in the nearly empty courtroom, Felix looked around and saw Bruno standing in the back by the door, a quizzical look on his face.

Arthur Rimjof, the Shrinkers & Movers attorney, got up and said:

"Your Honor, we contend that we are not liable for the reduction in the plaintiff's goods because of a quantum accident that occurred during the move. It's a pure Act of God, if ever there was one. All available theory supports the conclusion that God does in fact play dice with the universe, and that sometimes he even throws them where they cannot be seen. Statistical physics supports this well-known claim."

He paused and took a deep breath. "And while we regret what has happened to the plaintiff's goods, the accident is covered in the insurance and Act of God clause of the contract that he signed. However, to show our continued good faith, we are willing to shrink and resize the plaintiff's goods if he signs a waiver against any future litigation. But in any case, we are not liable."

The judge looked at Felix and Olsen. "Would you agree to another resize attempt?"

Olsen stood up and said, "Your Honor, my client feels that three disastrous attempts are quite enough. Already his goods have undergone a degree of degradation that cannot be reversed. His collection of first edition books—"

"Is there a list?" asked the judge.

"Yes, your Honor."

"Proceed."

"His first editions are no longer credible, your Honor. Having been stored in the buffer of the resizing apparatus repeatedly, they are technically no longer the same first editions, not to mention their difference in size. Their value is completely lost. In the language of booksellers, their provenance has become clouded. Your Honor, this is not simply a matter of having the books to read. A treasure has been... well, defaced."

"And does this apply to any of your client's other goods?" asked the judge.

"His cuckoo clock," said Olsen.

"But accurate resizing may not alter the value of ordinary household goods?"

"It shouldn't," Olsen said, "but one has to wonder how the structural quality may have been affected after repeated resizings."

"Speculation!" cried the company lawyer.

"I'm inclined to agree," the judge said.

"Not every possession of the plaintiff deserves to be treated as an heirloom. Let me ask this: When are valuables not devalued by this method of moving?"

"When the fact is not advertised,"

Olsen said, "there is no way to identify moved items. Admittedly, my client's problem is the first such case, but..."

"Your Honor," Rimjoy interrupted happily, with a visible enjoyment that seemed criminal, "may I approach the bench?"

"Yes, of course."

Olsen got up and joined Rimjoy before the judge. Felix could just barely hear the conversation.

"Your honor," Rimjoy said smoothly, "the plaintiff's asking settlement of a million-five for the book collection is a bit high, since he will continue to have private use of it, even if we grant its market devaluation. We propose a much lower figure, say half—but only if you rule in the plaintiff's favor."

"Ms. Olsen?" asked the judge.

"Absolutely not. It would be robbery."

"In that case," Rimjoy said, "we must hold that since the books were not individually itemized for our insurance, they must be discounted from the claim."

Felix watched the judge consider this point. "I so move," he said finally, looking at Olsen, "despite my sympathy for your client's case. The law is clear on this point."

"But the books can clearly be valued," Olsen insisted.

The judge nodded. "Yes, of course, but your client still has them. It also seems likely to me that they may now be unique, and therefore possibly even more valuable."

Felix glanced back at Bruno, saw him smile and then leave the courtroom.

"Now, about the rest of your client's goods," the judge continued. "They are insured, and some settlement will have to be made, once we have determined whether this was or was not an Act of God."

"Your Honor," Rimjoy said, "here are documents confirming that this sort of thing is an Act of God, and that it has never happened before to Shrinkers & Movers."

"Your Honor," Olsen said, raising her voice. "There was nothing in the contract... about this kind of damage."

"The standard Act of God clause must cover it," Rimjoy said. The judge sighed. "So it must."

"However, your Honor," Rimjoy said happily, "in the interest of good business practice, we propose to replace all the usual items, except the library, of course, at our expense."

"Then you don't wish to try to resize anything, the library included?" the judge asked.

"No, your Honor. It might lead to further difficulties."

"Like what?"

"Informational degradation from repeated attempts," Rimjoy said, "at this point in our technology."

"What?" asked the judge.

"Too much has been done to the basic material. It's apparently been... affected at the quantum level, to the point where fresh resizing might be... chancey. The shrinking and resizing operation has always been done with fresh subjects. The plaintiff's repeated problem with his possessions points to the possibility that the operation may not work as well with objects that have been shrunk and resized repeatedly."

"I see," said the judge. "Ms. Olsen, do you accept on behalf of your client?"

Olsen glanced back at Felix, giving him a helpless look. Felix reluctantly nodded his approval. It would be the best he could get. If the library was now worthless, he would have it trans-

ferred into electronic storage and use a handreader, which would magnify the pages to his needs; but if the judge was right about its uniqueness, then Shrinkers & Movers had done him a great favor.

He kept the cuckoo clock and the chessmen. Everything else except the library he agreed to have replaced.

Bruno came with his truck and knocked all the twenty-five-percent stuff down to the size of dice.

"Want me to take it all away?" he asked Felix.

"No, I'll get rid of it myself. Just dump it all in that metal wastebasket you forgot." He laughed. "It's still big enough!"

It took a week to refurnish his house. When he came home on the following Monday, all his furniture and household stuff had been replaced, and perfectly placed. There was a "Thank you for your business" card sitting on his kitchen table, signed by Bruno.

Felix smiled, then looked over into the kitchen corner and spied the metal wastebasket. He went over and looked down at his old possessions, now diminished to a handful of extreme miniatures. What could he do with them? Keep them as souvenirs in a glass cabinet? That almost appealed to him, but



Shrinkers & Movers

it was not the way to start his new life.

For the first time in weeks he realized that he had not thought of June for some time. The distraction of the court case had been good for something after all. He felt almost purged of her.

But there was something still missing. Some final act, some fleeting moment of transition that would settle him into his new state once and for all.

And he knew what he had to do.

He brought the wastebasket containing his diminished possessions out into his spacious backyard and placed it in the center of the bright green lawn. He looked around at the low hedge and felt peaceful. Then he looked down into the metal basket, and felt calm as he realized that this was the way it had to be. He felt nothing for the contents of the basket, only relief that he would now be rid of them.

The house behind him was what he had always wanted: open space on each floor, and floors deep in the ground, where the silence was complete, where he could retreat to the home theater that he now planned to install. There he would dial up any concert, play, or movie that his kind had ever made, and watch without the interference of another human being, whose presence had always perturbed his judgment and appreciation.

As he continued to gaze down into the wastebasket, he heard a distant ringing, and realized that it was coming from the jumble of his shrunken possessions.

He knelt down on the soft designer grass and listened.

It was a telephone.

Quickly he rummaged around in the pile of furniture and household items at the bottom of the basket, looking for the shrunken portable phone.

Finally he found it—a quarter the size of the nail on his little finger, a tiny bulky ringing away proudly at the universe of big things.

He lifted it out between his thumb and forefinger and dropped it gently into the palm of his left hand.

It stopped ringing and lay there like a dead insect, and he realized that he had somehow pressed *listen*.

"Hello?" a high voice asked.

He put his ear closer.

"Is anyone there? Felix?"

June.

"Felix—pick up the phone! I drove by your new house. It's beautiful. I heard what happened! Poor dear."

Some court reporter, he realized, had probably written a mocking news item about his move. He didn't much care, but Shrinkers & Movers would probably get upset.

"Felix! Pick up the phone!"

Only a few weeks ago he would have been glad to get a call from her, but now her voice was appropriately small, far away, coming to him from a distant past like long-traveling light from a dead star.

"Felix!" she cried as he dropped the phone into the basket. It landed with a click, like that of a marble dropping into his boyhood bag of cat's-eyes.

He took out his lighter, snapped up the flame, and dropped it into the basket. An icy chill shot up his spine as the contents of

the basket began to burn, sending up a small sickly column of gray smoke.

Thrilled, he watched this mini *Götterdämmerung's* Valhalla burning in a basket and thought of his work. Paper books and documents, fiche, tapes, disks, and obsolete storage and retrieval systems were all in a slow fire—an Alexandrian library burning at a stately pace; and he was a fireman, saving data from the flames. He thought of Troy, Carthage, and Rome being consumed by their ancient flames, and how much the size of anything counted toward it being taken seriously. Diminish anything physically, and it became a small matter, a passing moment, momentous only to creatures of comparable size. There was nothing in this basket that mattered to him now. The fire was too small to awe.

The smoke darkened deliciously, and he realized with sudden relief that he was more interested in his new cat, who would arrive tomorrow: a beautiful black creature with a white chest of fur like a Cossack, who had looked up at him with bright, youthful green eyes of unmistakable love. Nothing would stand in his way now, he realized as he coughed and backed away from the heat of the roiling basket. The flames stilled up suddenly as the inferno reached its greatest intensity and sent a gray cloud skyward. Nothing would stand in his way, he said again to himself, watching the cloud dissipate.

His resolve was undiminished when his doorbell rang the next morning and a tall, thin policeman gave him a ticket for burning garbage in his backyard.

"Sorry," the cop said politely, "but you did it out in full view. Your neighbor took pictures."

Felix took the ticket and glanced at it. "No problem," he said. "I'll pay it immediately." And he smiled. ☹



about the author

George Zebrowski's thirty books include novels, short fiction collections, anthologies, and a book of essays. He has published more than sixty works of short fiction and more than a hundred articles and essays. His best-known book is *Macrolife*, which was chosen by *Library Journal* as one of the one hundred best science-fiction novels. His latest novel is *Brute Orbits* (HarperPrism). Forthcoming in 1999 are *Skyline: Visions of Our Homes in Space* (Harcourt Brace), edited with Gregory Benford, and *Cave of Stars* (HarperCollins), a companion to *Macrolife*. His website is located at <http://ebbs.english.vt.edu/alt/projects/zebrowski>.



about the illustrator

Gordon Strader is a freelance illustrator who has worked out of his Emeryville, Calif., studio for the past nine years. His clients have included *AT&T*, Adobe, Microsoft, IBM, Newsweek, Time, and just about every computer-related magazine. While working for the San Francisco Examiner, he was introduced to the computer, and he refers to that as the event that defined his look as an illustrator. Comments are welcome at gstrader@dnv.com.

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*It's all in
the contract.
He gets to
walk away,
and she ends up
with...*

BY LESLIE WHAT

THE BIG MAN SITS ACROSS FROM ZITA, brow furrowed, black eyes fixed upon the desk. He strokes the mahogany finish while talking, rather absently, as if trying to smooth things out. Every now and again he glances up to make certain Zita is still paying attention to his story. Two thugs are outside, waiting for him in the parking lot. Can he hire her to take his place, deal with the thugs, so he won't have to? He doesn't have much time to decide, and certainly, from his view, no choice.

Zita scribbles a few notes and is grateful he doesn't stare at her like a lot of customers, who give her an I-can't-believe-I'm-really-here look and expect her to find their

THE COST OF DOING BUSINESS

naïveté charming. When customers stare at her long legs or the dress cut low to expose skin smooth as a white chocolate shell, it isn't really Zita they are seeing. Her perfection is only skin-deep, skin-deep being all anyone can afford, even the big man.

She notices his gold Rolex and his suit sewn from fine wool. Like her, the big man wears his riches on the outside.

"This is the worst thing that's ever happened to me," the big man blathers. "At first I didn't know what to do, but then I looked up, saw your billboard. That's why I'm here."

Driving to work this morning he was carjacked. "I'm a lucky man," he says, really lucky. The thugs were the curious type; they agreed to let him hire a surrogate victim in exchange for an extra couple of bills and a contract promising immunity. That's the way things are done these days, when people act reasonably. Fortunately for the big man, the thugs are reasonable men.

Zita listens as he prattles off twenty reasons why he needs to hire her instead of facing things on his own. She's tempted to correct him, but doesn't. The excuses are all part of the game. She knows why he wants to hire her, has known from the moment he walked into her office. It has nothing to do with his

ILLUSTRATION BY
D. ALEXANDER GREGORY

suspicious wife, or a job he can't afford to take time off from, or even his heart condition. Sure, the big man is afraid of pain—who isn't?—but there's more to it than that. The big man has sought Zita's services for the same reason anyone hires a surrogate victim. He wants to see someone else suffer.

Something terrible has happened to him; he can't turn back the clock, so he might as well make the best of it. He won't admit the reason he'll pay a premium to hire her instead of bailing Mr. Tompkins on the second floor: Hiring a young woman instead of a middle-aged man makes the deal a little sweeter.

The transaction is completely legal, but the big man feels enough shame about his cowardice that he works himself into a sweat; he pauses to dab his forehead with a handkerchief. When he brings it away, his brow is still furrowed. The wrinkles on his face are set, like a shirt that has been abandoned for the rag bin. He looks around the room, seeming to notice his surroundings for the first time.

She has decorated well out front. Out here, where she shows her public face, it's perfect. The walls are painted a fleshy tone called "peach fizz." Her costumes are one-of-a-kind and are displayed in a glass case. The overstuffed chairs are covered with top-of-the-line fabrics that the sales associate promised could take a lot of abuse. Her desk is an

HE TAKES HER TIME BEFORE
QUOTING A PRICE. THE ONLY
REASON TO ASK FOR MORE THAN

HE NEEDS IS TO IMPRESS UPON A CUSTOMER THE VALUE OF HER

eighteenth-century French copy, and on the walls are several abstract oils she bought at an uptown gallery, all by the same artist, someone kind of famous (though not so much as to be overpriced) whose name she can't ever remember. She doesn't understand abstract painting; it's just that realism bothers her.

Her office is nothing like the back room where she lives. The floors there are scratched and bare, except for the ripped mattress where she sleeps. Paint peels from the walls like skin from an old sunburn. On the small table where she takes her meals sits a shrine dedicated to her daughter: a gold-rimmed snapshot surrounded by dried wreaths and flowers, plastic beads, a favorite book. A shower takes up a quarter of the room; a small refrigerator covers what would otherwise be the counter space, and that's okay. She doesn't need much room, and she doesn't want much counter space. Anything that can't be eaten cold right out of the container isn't worth eating.

Just then the telephone rings, and the big man says, "Aren't you going to get that?"

It's probably some idiot calling to ask if she'll have her pants pulled down in front of a minister, or if she'll let some guy's boss chew her out in front of all his coworkers. "Popcorn" is what surrogates call the little jobs. Things that fill up

space without having much substance. She takes on popcorn occasionally, when she's in the right mood, but usually refers little jobs to a girl she met one time when she was in the hospital. That girl is in a bad way and needs all the help she can get. Besides, Zita finds the big jobs much more satisfying.

"Well," the big man prompts. He's annoyed by the phone; he's the type who would be annoyed by interruptions. Eventually, the machine picks up, just as she knew it would. "A true emergency would walk right in without making an appointment. The way you did," she explains.

He nods, and she can tell he likes being thought of as a true emergency.

"Anything else you want to tell me?" she asks.

"Yeah. These guys are armed. One has a metal pipe and a gun, the other a long knife."

"Sounds double."

"So, how much do you charge?" he asks, somewhat timidly.

She expects him to say "I've never done this before." They often say that, even when she knows it isn't true. The big man doesn't say it, but she knows that's what he's thinking.

She takes her time before quoting a price. The only reason to ask for more than she needs is to impress upon a customer the value of her service. She doesn't really care about the money; she's not in business for that. There are a hundred Licensed Surrogates in her state. She doubts if one of them cares about money. No amount could make up for what she goes through every day, what they all go through. She states her fee. "My standard rate," she says. "Plus expenses."

"You'll take it all? Everything they dish out?" he asks.

SERVICE. SHE DOESN'T REALLY
CARE ABOUT THE MONEY; SHE'S
NOT IN BUSINESS FOR THAT.

She nods. That's what she does. She takes it all, every bit of it, so that important people like the big man can avoid suffering.

He reaches into his coat pocket for his wallet and his credit card. "Those guys looked pretty mean. There might be scarring."

"Those are the expenses."

They both laugh, but his is more like a grunt. The whole experience must be quite a strain on his heart: His breathing quickens, his lips fade to a powdery blue. When the card changes hands, his fingers leave behind a cold residue that makes her want more than anything to duck into the back room for a shower. Stop it, she tells herself. Disgust is not professional.

"What would you like me to wear?" she asks.

He stands and faces the glass case. Her sequined gown has a rip and is being repaired, but otherwise everything is there.

"The white leather coveralls," he says after a while. "Nothing underneath. And don't zip it up all the way. Leave a little cleavage. Not too much, just a shadow. Ladylike, not slutty."

His face turns ruddy, and she knows he would like her to disrobe in front of him. Not my job, she thinks. Not my job. "If you'll excuse me," She opens the display case and holds the coveralls against her, giving him a moment to reconsider his choice.

"That will be fine," he says

Zita smiles a professional smile, then steps into the back room to change.

SHE TAKES THE BIG MAN'S ARM and leads him through the hallway to the rear staircase. They walk down to the first floor. "Were there protestors out today?" she asks, gesturing over her shoulder toward the front.

"I didn't see any when I pulled into the lot," he says. "I hope there isn't trouble. I don't want trouble. Or publicity."

"Listen," she says, "if they weren't out front, they certainly won't be out back. There's no point in protesting unless someone sees you. These guys don't care about morality—they only want it to look like they do."

"Okay," he says, not sounding convinced.

They open the fire door and step onto the parking lot. The sun hides behind thin clouds, yet the day is maggy and bright. If the sun were out it would be blinding, one of those days when you can't even look at the ground without squinting. Zita sees the perps inside what she guesses is the big man's car. Black Beamer, sunroof, leather interior. They walk closer.

The big man realizes that the seats have been slashed. He groans.

"They can be replaced," she says.

He answers, "Yeah, but still."

"Forget it," she says. "Just think of it as the cost of doing business."

"Easy for you to say," says the big man.

"Easy?" she says, and stops walking. "Easy?" Just what

he's majoring in political science—in a dirty T-shirt and torn pants.

She notices that the big man has silently dropped back behind her. Good, she thinks. Better he stay out of her way.

"Give him his stuff," she tells the thugs. "You can have the money and you can have me. He just wants what belongs to him."

A parking lot attendant, wearing earphones, approaches.

Because she doesn't recognize him, she guesses that he's new here. Zita reaches into her pocket to flash her license.

He stops, rubs his neck as if trying to remember what he has been told about such things at the orientation. At last it hits him: She's a surrogate, just doing her job. The attendant salutes. "Sorry to intrude," he says, and walks back to his booth.

She replaces her license, tucks it between the few bills she carries for show.

"Shit!" says the skinny partner, looking about. He's nervous.

It's nice to know, she thinks, that you can be a total jerk and still feel nervous.

"I don't know if I like this," he says. "Maybe we shouldn't have let him talk us into this."

For a second the leader looks like he might agree with his sidekick. Then the big man says, "Don't forget you signed a contract. I'll press charges if you don't hold up your end of the deal," and bravado washes over him; he swaggers away from the car like the bad guy in a Western.

The big man pushes Zita forward. "The briefcase," he whispers. "Tell them not to stuff it."

"What makes you think I won't kill you both?" asks the leader. He waves his gun in an arc.

The big man gasps, and Zita turns to glare at him, warning him to stay calm. She's the one they want to see acting scared, not him. It's her job now. She knows from experience that if the big man screams or acts stupid, he'll mess things up. "Relax," she barks. They have a contract. Life is not the free-for-all some people assume it is. The majority abides by the rules. After all, what would become of society if everyone changed things willy-nilly?

"Don't forget your agreement," she says. "He doesn't want

EVERY DAY, WHAT THEY ALL GO THROUGH.

THERE ARE A HUNDRED LICENSED SURROGATES IN HER STATE. SHE DOUBTS IF ONE OF THEM CARES ABOUT MONEY. NO AMOUNT COULD MAKE UP FOR WHAT SHE GOES THROUGH

does he think this is? He's even more of a jerk than she imagined.

He must realize his faux pas, for he looks at his feet and says, "Sorry. Come on. Let's get this over with." The big man calls out to the perps in the car, "Here she is." He speaks quickly; he is very anxious to put this all behind him. "You boys remember our deal, now."

The one who must be the leader opens the front door and steps out. He holds a pistol, aims it toward Zita. He's short, and his hair is black and nicely cut. He reminds her of a philosophy student: jeans, a plaid flannel shirt, clean shoes. His partner is skinny, with sunken eyes like a twenty-four-hour bruise. The partner is dressed more slovenly—maybe

any trouble."

"Maybe I want trouble," says the leader.

"That's why I'm here," Zita says. "Go ahead, scumbag, take it out on me. Think of all the women you've known who have led you on, but in the end decided they were too good for you. Women who made you beg for affection, then denied you what you deserved, what you needed. Think of what you would have done to them if they hadn't managed to get away." She takes a step closer. "Give him his stuff. You can keep me."

Her statement has the impact she is aiming for. He grimaces, and a tic starts near his upper lip. "Stay there!" he says to his partner. "Me first."

He tosses the car keys to the pavement. The big man stoops to grab them, scurries out of the way. The leader stands before her. His breath is sweet, like he's just sucked on a peppermint. She doesn't know why, but this strikes her as funny.

A SHARP PAIN SHOOTS FROM HER
ARM THROUGH HER CHEEK.
SHE GROANS. "DOCTOR, CAN YOU
PLEASE GIVE ME AN INJECTION?"

"I THOUGHT YOU LIKED THE PAIN," SAYS THE DOCTOR.

Before she can stop herself, she is giggling.

"Bitch!" he says. "What are you laughing at?" He slaps her face and slaps it again and again until she cries out. *The one time she couldn't change places and ease someone else's suffering was when her daughter died.*

Now he is grinding his prick against her belly and squeezing her tit hard enough to sting.

She feels the big man watching her.

"No!" she cries out. *There was nothing she could have done, only there was, and she knows it.*

He takes the pistol and brings it down hard on her head.

She knew it wasn't safe to let the girl outside unsupervised, but he said, "Forget about the kid," and she said, "Okay," and now her baby was dead and no amount of grief could bring her back.

The pistol strikes again.

She feels terror that this man might hurt her more than they usually do. There's a gleam in his eye, like he doesn't care whether she's dead or alive when it comes time to rape her. "Please," she says. They always like it when she begs, but that's not why she asks for mercy. The pain has become unbearable. She can no longer tell the ground from the sky. She stumbles and falls. With her ear pressed against the asphalt, she thinks she hears the big man's heavy breathing.

The leader kicks her in the small of her back, says, "Get up, bitch."

She screams as the heel of his boot knocks into her face.

Her little baby, drowned, and her inside, making it with a guy who still denies he was the father.

Oh, God, it should have been me, she thinks. Oh, God, it should have been me.

WHEN ZITA COMES TO, she's in her usual suite at the hospital.

A nurse says dryly, "Good. You're back from the dead," as she injects some white fluid from a vial into the IV. The nurse writes something on a chart before offering Zita a brown plastic cup filled with water.

Zita tries to say thanks, but her throat feels like a dozen razor blades are propping it open. She's thirsty, but too afraid

to drink, so shakes her head no. The movement brings on a pounding pain and makes everything blurry.

Next, the doctor struts into the room and reads the notes on the chart before acknowledging her. "You again," he says. He yawns. "You're sending both my kids to college. Private. Out of state. You know that, don't you?" He winks at the nurse; then they both laugh. He sidles up near Zita's face to shine a penlight in her eyes. He presses his fingers against her neck. "We almost lost you this time. Did it hurt?" he asks.

"Not enough," she answers.

He takes a mirror from the bedside stand to let her see his handiwork.

The face staring back in the mirror looks vaguely familiar, like someone she's only seen from far away.

"Looking good," the doctor says. "Better than new. Give it

"THINK WHAT YOU LIKE,"

ZITA SAYS. EVEN THE HOSPITAL

STAFF WANTS TO SEE HER SUFFER.

a week for the swelling to go down. Oh, and I had to replace a hip, so go easy on jogging."

A sharp pain shoots from her jaw up through her cheek. She groans. "Doctor, can you please give me an injection?"

"I thought you liked the pain," says the doctor.

"Think what you like," Zita says. Even the hospital staff wants to see her suffer, wants to see her beg. Ironic that she must pay them for the privilege. "Give me a shot."

"Well, I suppose she can have some morphine," says the doctor. "Five milligrams IV now. Every four hours as needed, until tomorrow. After that, she can take codeine. Wouldn't want her to get too dependent," he says.

An orderly walks in, bearing an obscenely big flower arrangement. It's too large to go on the bedside stand, so the orderly sets it on the floor beside the wall. He reads her the card without asking if she cares who sent the flowers.

They're from the big man. Pale yellow roses with sprigs of freesia the color of bruises. How sweet.

IN A COUPLE OF DAYS they send her out to finish her recovery at home. The bed is there for someone who really needs it, not for someone who simply wants it.

"Always a pleasure," says the doctor with a wave. "See you in a couple of months."

She ignores him and asks the nurse to call her a cab.

The nurse makes Zita sit in a green vinyl wheelchair, despite her assertion that she is well enough to walk. "You want to walk out of here like a normal human being, you gotta walk in like one, too," says the nurse.

Zita shrugs and lowers herself into the chair. She has no change of clothes and must wear her coveralls, now caked with blood that's gone black. The nurse sets the heavy flower arrangement in Zita's lap and wheels her down the hallway to the exit.

Once outside they are accosted by an angry woman in a tailored black pants suit, who waves a placard in front of her face that reads, "OUTLAW SURROGATE VICTIMS NOW!"

A camera crew rushes in for a closeup.

"How can you do this?" the woman screams at Zita. "How can you let these perverts abuse you so? It has to stop! What you're doing is against God! This madness has got to stop!"

The woman keeps screaming as she follows Zita to the taxi. "You're nothing but an overpriced whore!" she says. "Whore?"

The cabbie takes the flowers and opens her door so Zita can get in. He sets the flowers on the seat beside her. He shoos away the protestor with a practiced wave, elbows the cameraman in the ribs. He hurries to get behind the wheel. "Time is money," says the cabbie, revving the engine. "Where to, Miss Whore?" Without waiting for her to answer, he pulls away from the lot.

"Very funny," she says. She tells him the address of her office. It hurts a bit to talk, but otherwise she feels pretty

WANTS TO SEE HER BEG.

IRONIC THAT SHE MUST PAY

THEM FOR THE PRIVILEGE.

"GIVE ME A SHOT."

good. It's amazing, she thinks, how quickly the body heals.

"So, uh, you're one of them surrogate victims, huh? Not sure how I feel about those. More I think about it, more I tend to agree with that lady back there. Maybe the whole business ought to be illegal. Maybe we shouldn't let people like you do what you are doing."

"It would be like it was during Prohibition," Zita says. "A wasted effort. Couldn't stop it then. Can't stop it now."

"I get your point all right, but that's no reason to give up," says the cabbie. "Just because you can't get rid of all evil doesn't mean you can't get rid of some of it. You gotta start somewhere, don't you think? Gotta try. Otherwise, where would we be? You know, society. Culture."

"I never thought of it like that," she says. There's no point in arguing with the cabbie. She could make him feel bad by telling him that she makes a hundred times what he does. Maybe then he would understand, or at least think he did.

They drive on, painfully silent like they are in a room where someone is expected to die. The cabbie lets her out in the alley and stays seated behind the wheel.

She braces the flowers between her good hip and the car door, gives the cabbie a big enough tip to make him blush.

"Been nice talking to you," she says, then opens the door and steps out.

"Likewise," answers the cabbie. Unlike her, he probably means it. He pulls away without waiting to see if she can walk to her building.

Zita leaves the flower arrangement on the stoop for the homeless lady who lives by the trash bin. She tucks the last

of her money inside the card.

She manages to climb up the steps to her place, where she plans to sleep until her prescription for pain runs dry. She hangs the closed sign on the door. She's exhausted. Maybe by next week she'll be ready to listen to her messages, choose her next job. Something easy, mindless. A prank or some simple humiliation. Popcorn, for a change.

It feels good to be home. In her "kitchen" she pours cheap bourbon into a chipped coffee cup that reads "World's Greatest Mom." She doesn't much like the stuff because it burns, but she can't see paying extra just to get something that goes down smooth. With the door that leads to her office closed, she can hardly hear the phone ring. When it keeps on ringing, she figures out that the answering machine is full. They've got a lot of nerve calling the minute she gets out of the hospital. Let them wait.

Zita pours herself another shot. It's like drinking luke-warm fire and doesn't quite do the trick. She has another drink, but the phone is still ringing, and the only way to make it stop is to pull out the plug.

Even if no one else can understand the why of it, Zita knows with all her heart that being a professional victim is the right thing to do.

So the protestors think she should stop. She has no use for the rhetoric of do-gooders. What do they know? She is a professional victim. No matter what she does, she's going to suffer for the rest of her life in ways no one can even imagine. Her baby is dead; she has no choice but to suffer. Assholes like the doctor and the nurse and the cabbie and the zealot with the sign—they just want her to give it away for free. ♣

about the author

Leslie What has published dozens of poems, essays, columns, and short stories in newspapers, anthologies, small press and commercial magazines, and has recently completed a comic novel. Leslie was once invited to join the New Orleans Maskmakers Guild; she has shown her work in galleries in Louisiana, California, Oregon, and New York. The Artistic Co-Director of What! Land? Enterprises, Leslie was the original "Santa Gerilla," delivering handcrafted "Christmas Stockings for the Weird" while dressed in a fake-fur suit. In her various personas, she is a member of a sacred burial society that provides ritual and spiritual care to the dead and to those in mourning.

about the illustrator

Just twenty-six years young, D. Alexander Gregory brings a wealth of worldly experience to his paintings. Gregory lived in Copenhagen, London, Budapest, and Romania, before landing stateside at the ripe old age of eight. He currently lives and works in Orlando, Florida. His work includes magazine and game-card illustrations, as well as covers for Marvel and DC Comics.

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You Can't Change the Laws of Physics

True SF can be hard to find on the PC—but it is out there.

▼ **SPACE WORLD.** Sandstorms and orcs/bogies add true SF to *Dune 2000*.

CENTURIES AGO, an Englishman whose name would later be borrowed by an unsuccessful palmtop computer was, according to popular legend, struck on the noggin by a piece of fruit, which got him to wondering what exactly made that apple drop in his direction. If you don't buy *that* story, then perhaps Isaac Newton started thinking hard about gravity after discussing planetary motion with a fellow named Edmund Halley. However it happened, Newton's Laws of Motion remain the backbone of modern physics to this day and have colored Western science ever since they were published at the end of the seventeenth century.

Newton's laws make a great barometer to measure whether what you're reading (or watching or playing or writing) can be defined as science fiction. Essentially, it's all about gravity and motion. How is it created? Is it handled realistically? When your steely-eyed hero stands

hit that "all stop" key, or does your fearsome vessel simply halt in space with no indication of the force that would be necessary to cease your powerful forward momentum? If you drift, that's Newton for you.

This standard for SF doesn't work across the board. By virtue of the fact that these are scientific laws we're talking about, the presence of Newtonian physics does not have to mean that you're playing a science fiction PC game. Few would contend that a title such as *Flight Simulator 98* (Microsoft) is science fiction, but the engine that powers the game is rife with motion and physics driven by those same laws. A fired pistol in *Rainbow Six* (Red Storm Entertainment) will recoil due to the equal and opposite force of the bullet leaving the barrel. SF? Not hardly.

What makes an electronic game a piece of science fiction? This question almost doesn't seem fair. A written work of fiction and electronic entertainment can't help but be very different media. However, we have to start somewhere, and science fiction started on the printed page.

Go to the Source

How do some of the well-known figures in SF define the genre? In a 1952 essay, Isaac Asimov asserted that "modern science fiction is the only form of literature that consistently considers the nature of the changes that face us, the possible consequences, and the possible solutions." Brian Aldiss contended in *Trillion Year Spree: The History of Science Fiction* that "Science fiction is the search for definition of man and his status in the universe which will stand in our advanced but confused state of knowledge (science), and is characteristically cast in the Gothic or post-Gothic mold."

And what do these statements tell us? That SF writers tend to define science fiction according to the content of their own work? Perhaps. Frank Herbert's definition was that SF "represents the modern heresy and the cutting edge of speculative imagination as it grapples with Mysterious Time—linear or nonlinear time." Well, sure, Frank, that was basically the deal with *Dune*. But what about *Dune 2000* (Westwood Studios) or either of its predecessors, *Dune* and *Dune 2*?

There is certainly no Muad'Dib in *Dune 2000*, although a nondescript Bene Gesserit Sister tells you at the start of the game that you are the "Chosen One." The game itself, however, consists of deploying and moving units of armament and infantry across the sands of the planet Arrakis. Areas that you control are



on the bridge of his advanced starship, does he wear magnetized shoes to stay on the deck, or does he trust in a nebulous "artificial gravity" field?

Say you launch yourself into the inky void to take out the rebel base on Yavin IV, or a Shivan mothership bent on the destruction of humanity. Does your ship continue to drift for a few kilometers when you



Electro Games

The *StarCraft* story definitely takes place in the future (the last time I checked, there were no Protoss looking to take my life for Aiuu). So yes, *StarCraft* is indeed SF, although in many ways the characterization is almost entirely due to setting.

marked out on a very terrestrial-looking map, with your holdings color-coded to differentiate them from those of your enemies. The armament consists of tanks, ground troops, wheeled vehicles, and eventually aircraft that don't look all that different from something you might see pulling out of LaGuardia. While engaging in all of this curiously ground-based combat, you simultaneously mine the precious spice called melange. You'll use the melange (the economy of the game) to, as a friend of mine once put it, "make more money to make more war to make more money to make more war to make more money to make more war."

Is *Dune 2000* a war game? Certainly, and not a bad one at all. Can *Dune 2000* seriously be considered a science fiction war game? That depends on how we define SF, and Herbert's definition isn't much help. The very way that the designers of *D2K* have laid out the game, it revolves around strategy, which just doesn't seem to involve much heresy. The time frame is pretty linear, too.

Does Asimov's definition work here? Certainly. Human beings have adapted to the environments of alien worlds, having been off the surface of the Earth for so long that few even remember the name of that planet. The Guild Navigators that rely on melange to traverse the spaceways are hardly human at all anymore. All told, however, man is man—and his usual solution to the challenges that arise is to blow that challenge into the next county. Aldiss's statement also applies perfectly—the "Chosen One" (that's you, remember) must decide what actions define him.

the mechanics of the game stick to Newtonian physics, for the most part. Even the use of spice isn't necessarily outside the realm of hard science—especially considering the time period during which Herbert wrote. Why *couldn't* a chemical open up some of that ninety-five percent of our brains that we're not using? If you pull out these SF elements of the story, you have a very different game. So ultimately, yes, *D2K* is SF, although almost all of the SF elements are taken directly from Herbert's novel.

'Craft Work

So try to name another science fiction game ... say, the omnipresent *StarCraft* (Blizzard Entertainment). This game derives its name from a pair of real-time Blizzard strategy hits (*WarCraft* and *WarCraft II*) that were set in a semi-medieval fantasy-based world. Tick off the number of times that you've heard *StarCraft* referred to as "*WarCraft* in space." Despite the fact that for the most part, *StarCraft* takes place on planetary surfaces, many insist on sticking with this definition. But is *SC* SF?

Well, there are aliens, two flavors in fact. But couldn't they just as easily be orcs? Sure. But they're *not*, they're Zergs and Protoss. And to make reference to our Heinlein definition, modern science is rife with theories that life exists on other worlds. Jodie Foster even had a mathematical formula for it. Maybe the part about building entire units from crystal and gas is reaching a bit, but let's give the game a little license and say that these items are simply necessary for the training and recruitment of troops and vehicles. And if humans had to fight for control of another world, would they? Of course—it happened on the surface of Arrakis, and in many ways our own Cold War space race was a fight for control of the moon and other solar planetary bodies. The *StarCraft* story definitely takes place in the future (the last time I checked, there were no Protoss looking to take my life for Aiuu). So yes, *StarCraft* is indeed SF, although the characterization is almost entirely due to setting.

Let's say for a moment that *Descent: Freespace* (Interplay) is really, at its heart, just an old World War II dogfight sim. Sure, you sit within a futuristic high-tech starfighter, you're shooting at Veduzans and Shivans instead of the bloody Jerrys, but do the names really matter that much? Couldn't those huge capital starships simply be the *Bismarck* floating in space? It's not like they're flying circles around you; they might as well just be sitting there.

Like many of the better space combat simulations, hard science sits at the core of this engine, and in particular this game *feels* authentic and realistic. Actual physics dictate the movement—come



▲ RIGHT THIS WAY.
Putting the 'star' in
StarCraft.

When it comes right down to it, Robert Heinlein's definition probably works as the best benchmark. In *The Science Fiction Novel*, he stated, "A handy short definition of almost all science fiction might read: realistic speculation about possible future events, based solidly on adequate knowledge of the real world, past and present, and on a thorough understanding of the nature and significance of the scientific method. To make this definition apply to cover all science fiction (instead of 'almost all') is necessary only to strike out the word 'future.'"

Does *Dune 2000* fit in to this framework? Well,

Here there be *dragons...*

... and spells,
magical items and
monsters, character
kits, weapons
and powers,
and proficiencies ...

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Electro Games screaming in too fast, and you can be sure

**Star Wars is
not science
fiction.
Jurassic Park
(whatever
you think
of Michael
Crichton's
writing)
is science
fiction.**

you'll overshoot your target, maybe even collide with it because *there's no friction to slow you down*. The method of faster-than-light travel is based on the popular "wormhole" theory that pops up in TV shows such as *Babylon 5* and *Deep Space Nine*.

Matters of Perspective

So far, things look pretty simple—but here is where things get messy, literally. Let's look at what might possibly be the absolute most popular game on the planet at the moment, although it might just be starting to wane a touch—*Quake II* (id Software). The first-person shooter, of which *Q2* is perhaps the best example, is most often set on an alien world where your mission is to mercilessly blast and massacre every living thing you see—because it's alien, and you need to get out alive.

The original first-person shoot-'em-up was the venerable *Wolfenstein 3D*, put out by id and Interplay. Aside from the obvious technical advances in *Quake II* (such as the improved graphics) and the not-so-obvious ones (like the ability to look up and down), *Q2* and *Wolfenstein* are virtually the same basic game. However, the villains in the earlier game aren't aliens—they're Nazis. There is nothing in *Quake II* that requires an

extrapolation of what we know about modern science. Even the "aliens" in *Quake II* don't look very alien—in fact, many of them bear more than a

passing resemblance to pro wrestlers. *Quake II* is an example of a game that doesn't rely on its SF elements enough to qualify as science fiction. Perhaps setting really is everything. Pull out what SF elements are there, and *Q2* is still essentially the same game. Remove the SF elements from *Freespace* and you've got a decompressed plane that can't maneuver and has no way to get home. Games that are licensed from popular SF entertainment should qualify as science fiction, shouldn't they? You'd think so. However, many of these games (especially those in the Lucasarts catalog) take their

lead from the closely related "space fantasy" genre.

The most well-known space fantasy, of course, is *Star Wars* and all the ripoffs it spawned—and *Star Wars* is largely a retelling of many terrestrial myths and legends ported over to a far-off galaxy.

In the case of *Star Wars*, there is very little if any attempt to adhere to the Heinlein "rules" of science fiction at all. The *Millennium Falcon* never seems to encounter any friction coming into a planet's atmosphere. For that matter, what's holding the *Falcon* up there, anyway? Before you say "repulsorlifts," ask yourself when you last saw a repulsorlift, or even saw anyone hypothesizing about one. You can't pull the SF pieces out of *Star Wars*, because there really aren't any there in the first place.

Land of the Lost

Star Wars is not science fiction. *Jurassic Park* (whatever you think of Michael Crichton's writing) is science fiction, and the upcoming *Trespasser: The Lost World* (DreamWorks Interactive) definitely draws on the hard science base established by the novels and subsequent films. The dinosaurs move and behave according to what we currently know about saurian physiology. Of course, so did the dinosaurs in Arthur Conan Doyle's original *The Lost World*, at least according to the science of the time. The cloning techniques depicted in *Jurassic Park*, while a bit of a stretch, are not inconceivable in this age of duplicated Scottish sheep.

Trespasser is an example of the kind of science fiction that people often forget is science fiction, simply because it isn't set on another world, and it's not in the far-flung future. There are no space-ships, no aliens, and more often than not, the tension in the story comes from a very primitive, primal fear—that of being eaten alive. Yet the steps taken to get to that point are pure SF. Pull the science fiction out of *Trespasser* and you don't have much of a game left at all. Heck, pitch a tent and stay a while—without the ever-present threat of cloned dinos on the rampage, "Site B" would probably be quite the vacation spot.

When I have a hankering to blast out into the void and make Roman candles out of a fleet of bizarre alien starfighters, then I'll be pretty disappointed if I plopped in the disc and was sent on a bombing raid over France. If I want to fight for my life against raptors and T-rexes, I'd better not get stuck in the tiger cage at the local zoo. If I specifically want to go shooting aliens, then taking a pot-shot at an out-of-work linebacker won't quite feel the same. But ultimately, if the gameplay is good, the action is compelling, and the story line grabs you from the get-go, does it really matter whether a particular game is truly science fiction?

Probably not. But it's good to know where the boundaries lie. ☘



▲ PRETTY COLORS!
Newton would
approve of Descart:
Freespace

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A column designed to acquaint the ordinary person with science
and other stuff that's really hard to understand.

ASK DR. SCIENCE...

July 1940 *T. L. of Coolibah, Australia, is anxious to learn the answer to this Science teaser: Dr. Science, what do they mean when they speak of absolute zero and why is it impossible to attain?*
Dear T. L.: Science persons have been chasing after absolute zero for a real long time. Personally, I wouldn't do it. If you want to get into a Science field, try something else. Science people who do this kind of stuff work in places like Beecher Falls, Vermont; Nordvik, Russia; and Madawaska, Maine. Have you ever been to Madawaska, Maine? My advice: Don't go there.

What happens is, these people call each other up two, three, sometimes four times a day. Someone'll say: "Hey, I'm telling you, it is absolutely zero up here." The person he's calling says: "Yeah? You don't know absolute zero. Where I'm standing, right now, it is absolute zero, pal."

This goes on all the time. And to answer your question, T. L.—and I'm revealing a Science secret that's never come out—the truth is, no one really wants to find absolute zero. Somebody finds it, then what? Grant money dries up, you've got a bunch of Science persons out of work. You've got to start over, looking for something else. Like, what is absolute hot? Then everybody's moving to the Amazon and Abilene, Texas. Everybody's headed for Nan-gapinoh, Borneo. Everybody's calling everyone up: "Hot? You think it's absolute hot in Zaire? You don't know

from hot, friend."

So why stir everybody up? Leave it like it is. We've got a saying in the Science biz: "You got a good gig? Don't be a bozo. Don't mess it up for anybody else."

(I know what I'm talking about, T. L. Dr. Science isn't trying to win a Nobel Prize. Dr. Science just wants to keep his job.)

Every night Schrödinger says, "I don't want to get up. Somebody check, see if my cat's in the box."

"Erwin," I'd tell him, "the cat's in the box."

Heisenberg says, "I don't know. I'm not sure, man."

"I'm sure," I'd say. "Go to sleep. Forget about the cat."

Big deal, right? That's all that happened.

That's it.

March 1992 *R. M. of Narrovo, Illinois, asks:*

Dr. Science, why doesn't everyone quit fighting it and get on the metric system? Dear R. M.: Hey, because it's a pain in the neck, that's why. Look: A kilo means a thousand. $K=1,000=10^3$. A thousand grams is one kilogram, and that's around 2.2 pounds. Which, by the way, is a liquid liter, and that's about a quart. You still with me? Great. Buy yourself a 38-liter hat and watch the Cowboys and the Giants play a little 30-centimeter ball. Third down, ball's on the 0.914 meter line ...

You know what the metric system's good for? It makes you look cool when you write Science Fiction. Other than that, forget it.

October 1997 *T. C. of Pentacrenas, Costa Rica, would like to know:*

Dr. Science, what is a Lepton? Dear T. C.: A Lepton is a very small subatomic person. They live in Ireland. Apparently they've got a lot of gold. I wish to hell I did.

February 1947 *E. W. A. of Cejin, China, would like an answer to this question:*

Dr. Science, what is the heaviest known element? Dear E. W. A.: The heaviest known element is the piano. You want to talk heavy, you're talking piano. Science guys Laurel and Hardy did a film on this. Take a look, you'll see what I mean. The second heaviest element is anything in the yard. Those sacks you've got to carry and spread

December 1935 *R. C. of Proabontas, Iowa, would like the answer to this question:*

Dr. Science, could you please tell me something about Schrödinger's cat?

Dear R. C.: I roomed with Schrödinger in school. Me, Heisenberg, and Schrödinger, cramped in this tiny little room. You weren't supposed to have a cat. Schrödinger had a cat. He kept the cat in a box.

April 1951 *D. L. of Sagnacbe, Colorado, asks:*

Dr. Science, can you tell me the family name of the common stag beetle?

Dear D. L.: The family name of the common stag beetle is Andersen. Unable to get a date in his native village of Ostensund, Sweden, he came to this country in 1863. He could not get a date here, either, and the family name died in 1876.



on the grass. So are rocks. Don't try to lift a rock. Dr. Science did, and now he's got to wear this funny-looking belt. The third heaviest thing is *The House of Seven Gables*. Trust me. Don't even try it.

April 1998 D. C. of Clatsop County, Oregon, asks the question:

Dr. Science, can you describe a naked singularity?

Dear D. C.: Listen, if you've got to talk dirty, don't even write. *AMAZING* Stories is for decent, right-thinking people who like Science stuff. We don't do naked here. Lucky for us, singularities with a bunch of space-time curves and infinite density stay in black holes where no one can see them. And that's where they ought to be, too.

September 1996 M. M. of *Rum Jungle, Australia*, would like to know:

Dr. Science, what are the qualities of a black hole? Dear M. M.: You don't happen to know the jerk that sent in the singularity stuff, do you? Okay, a black hole. First, it's black. Second, it's a hole. A star gets tired, it starts to collapse. Gravity goes on a tear. Matter goes in, it doesn't come out. Everything's under a lot of pressure in there—but hey, what do you care? You've got time to ask dumb questions. I've got to sit here and work in the lab.

August 1992 T. G. of Swink, Colorado, wants to share this information:

Dr. Science, I understand that after the Big Bang is over, the universe will collapse upon

itself and we'll get the Big Crunch.

Oh, my God, where'd you hear that?

August 1998 S. Y. of Hawaii, Hawaii, asks:

Dr. Science, I am interested in the field of antibiotic-resistant bacteria. I wonder if you'd give me more detailed information regarding the interaction between antibiotics and certain bacteria? It is quite clear that bacteria such as *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* and *Enterococcus faecalis* have developed a resistance to antibiotics. That being the case, please give me some examples of various defensive strategies bacterial cells use to combat antibiotic inhibition. I am especially interested in the enzyme degrading process, enzyme altering,

and the role of the DNA plasmid rings.

Dear S. Y.: Dr. Science would love to answer your questions, but he has a real important lunch date with one of the Science ladies in the lab. I hope you'll write us here at *AMAZING* Stories again sometime. ☹

All questions appearing in *ASK DR. SCIENCE* have been adopted from questions sent in by readers to *AMAZING* Stories over the years, or have been sent to Dr. Science by his collectors and other non-spirited persons.

We welcome your questions for this column. But please do not address your questions to Dr. Science himself. Dr. Science knows better than to open his own mail. Address your questions to Neal Barrett, Jr., Dr. Science's friend, at *AMAZING* Stories, P.O. Box 707, Revere, WA 98057-0707. Mr. Barrett will see to it that your questions are shipped under Dr. Science's door.

Danger Will Robinson! New Stamps Create Galactic Stamp-ede!

Owings Mills, Maryland — Science fiction fans and collectors are scrambling to obtain a Limited Edition 9 Stamp set issued by the Togolaise Republic to commemorate New Line Cinema's latest blockbuster, *Lost in Space*, based on one of the most popular television shows of the 1960s.

"Collector demand for these stamps has been unbelievable," stated John Van Emden of ICS, distributor. "Collectors know that this may be their only opportunity to get actual government issued Legal Tender stamps that are both beautiful and rare. In fact, we're nearly sold out."

Collectors are already predicting that in the very near future these *Lost in Space* stamps will be far more sought after and desirable than the U.S. Elvis stamp, the most popular issue of all time.

Each stamp is about four times the size of a regular U.S. postage stamp. They're legal for postage in the Togolaise Republic and are recognized by every postal authority around the world.

Gotta have 'em? They are available for a short time at \$9.95 (plus \$3 p&h) for the complete set of nine colorful stamps, accompanied by a Certificate of Authenticity and the free pocket guide, "99 Little Known Facts About *Lost in Space*." The most you can buy is six sets. Send your check or money order to ICS, 3600 Crondall Lane, Suite 100ARMSP, Owings Mills, MD 21117. To order by credit card, call toll free 1-800-805-0561.

Visit us at: www.icscollectibles.com





Prisoners of Paranoia

FRANTIC CALLS FOR VIGILANCE RING OUT regularly in 1950s science fiction films, as they do in much of America's Cold War pop culture. Reporter Ned "Scotty" Scott (Douglas Spencer) admonishes the world to "Keep watching the skies!" after he witnesses the narrow defeat of an "intellectual carrot" invader in 1951's *The Thing from Another World*. At the close of 1956's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, psychiatrist Miles Bennell (Kevin McCarthy) escapes the pod beachhead at Santa Mira to deliver the ominous warning, "You're next!" Both are classic moments in SF cinema, high points from two endlessly entertaining films. They're also fine specimens of archaic paranoid propaganda.

To today's audience, schooled relentlessly in tabloid journalism and the conspiracy myths built up around such events as the JFK assassination and the Roswell crash, both films seem a bit naive. There's certainly no surprise in their revelation of sinister forces subverting the American way of life. In the 1990s, that's a given.

In extremist circles, these dark powers manifest as jack-booted minions of the New World Order, black helicopters perpetrating cattle mutilations, and U.N. concentration camps secreted among the dairy farms of Wisconsin. Their cinematic incarnations range from

Patrick Stewart's rogue MK-ULTRA mind-control project in the tedious *Conspiracy Theory* to the always suspicious Federal Emergency Management Agency in *The X-Files: Fight the Future*. These are bogeymen plucked straight from the nightmares of the Montana Freemans and the Posse Comitatus. And the conspirators don't threaten the establishment; they're part of a greater network that already controls it.

The conspirator's evolution from outsider to entrenched insider is reflected nicely in the three movies inspired by Jack Finney's novel *The Body Snatchers*. Each successive film opens with the pods farther along in their invasion, with control of greater resources. In 1956, the battle is waged over the sleepy little town of Santa Mira. In 1978, it's San Francisco. By 1993's *Body Snatchers*, there is no contested ground; the skirmish is over before the tide card flashes on the screen. The aliens begin with control of an army base and all other bastions of power within the film's world. Even the local school is conquered territory, as revealed in a wonderfully creepy scene where a young boy new to the school finds that all his pod-possessed classmates finger-point identical images.

The changing nature of the conspirator in the cinema of paranoia has required the paranoid hero to evolve as well.

A relative nobody foils the pods in 1956's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. Psychiatrist Miles Bennell isn't really part of the power structure in Santa Mira. Yet he manages to uncover the truth and deliver his message to the outside world, to uncorrupted authority figures with the might necessary to stop the pods. Even if we discount the definitively upbeat ending the producer tacked onto the film, Bennell is still alive as the closing credits roll. The audience is left with his words of warning ringing in its ears as the house lights come up.

In the 1978 remake, a mid-level bureaucrat in San Francisco, with access to both the mayor's office and the FBI, only slows the invasion. Health inspector Matthew Bennell (Donald Sutherland) is more worldly and devious than his predecessor. He also has the apparent advantage of cynical friends, whose paranoia is given voice in the distracted mutterings of writer Jack Bellrose (Jeff Goldblum).

To these characters, versed in Watergate and Vietnam, authority figures are inherently suspect. They already distrust the police and the phone company. This should make them stronger adversaries for the pods. But they are as easy to defeat as their more trusting Eisenhower-era counterparts in Santa Mira. Easier, when you consider Kevin McCarthy's marvelously staged cameo. (He delivers the same frantic warning as in the '56 version, only to be chased to his death by a mob of pod people seconds later.)

▶ **PARANOIA WILL DESTROY YA.** Agents Scotty and Mulder keep score in a moral world where both good and evil exist.



Director Abel Ferrara doesn't even make a pretense of presenting a credible hero in 1993's *Body Snatchers*. In the film's opening moments, a voice-over by protagonist Marti Malone (Gabrielle Anwar) sets a downbeat, fatalistic tone. "In the end," she notes flatly, "it had to happen." Sure, in the film's climax she and chopper pilot Tim Young (Billy Wirth) blow up a few truckloads of pods, but even they seem to know it's a futile gesture. Once the ammo runs out, there's nowhere left for them to go.

By the late 1990s, the only sort of character to successfully wear the mantle of paranoid hero is the disreputable but official insider best exemplified by Fox Mulder (David Duchovny) of *The X-Files*. His status affords him a glimpse at the actual powers controlling the government and the resources to trip them up now and then. Like Donald Sutherland's character in the *Body Snatchers* remake, however, Mulder is more an annoyance than a credible threat.

His only hope for a more substantial victory is the awakening of the mainstream. Since the power structure is corrupt, only respectable and intelligent allies like Dana Scully (Gillian Anderson) can help turn the tide on the global conspiracy. And for all her cynicism, Agent Scully must eventually admit that "Spooky" Mulder is correct: The truth is out there. The audience would stand for nothing less.

To people overwhelmed by the complexity and seeming randomness of modern life, the conspiracy theories preached by Mulder and other prophets of paranoia

are simply more attractive than Scully's fully sanctioned, rationally constructed certainties. They depict a world that is, for all their pessimism, quite moral. Good and evil exist, and are easily defined once you have the secret scorecard. There are no senseless deaths, no random plagues or disasters, only the unfortunate results of some hidden agenda promoted by Freemasons, Zionists, Scientologists, or alien Grays. Even the goofy weirdness of the

discovery that someone else is pulling your strings comes absolution from responsibility. Your failures, your successes all belong to some power beyond your control. In *The Truman Show*, the erratic behavior of Truman Burbank (Jim Carrey) is excused by his circumstances. In the even more wildly paranoid SF/film noir hybrid *Dark City*, John Murdoch (Rufus Sewell) is suspected of a series of brutal murders, but discovers that everything he's

from a concept by its lack of substance. So conspiracy theories and movies rich with paranoid plots are bound to flourish. In fact, "Spot the Conspiracy" has become such a socially acceptable pastime that such diverse public figures as Ross Perot, Pat Buchanan, and Hillary Rodham Clinton can pursue it openly and vigorously with a minimum of public scorn.

With popular acceptance comes a demand for an expanded cast of potential conspirators. Depending on your political and philosophical leanings, the secret masters of the world can turn out to be the military-industrial complex, the media elite, Washington lobbyists, the Christian fundamentalists who try to sneak God into the public schools, or the Woodstock-refugees at the ACLU who try to stop them. Maybe all of the above.

Based on the financial and critical success of such paranoia-tinged mainstream films as *Wag the Dog* and such genre fust as *Dark City* and it, Hollywood will continue to parade these myriad secret menaces through theaters for some time to come. The main problems with such movies is that the conspirators, once exposed, often appear more pathetic than threatening. Like *Brazil*'s menacing stormtroopers, who are revealed as twenty thugs once their helmets come off, embodiments of evil tend to wither when examined too closely.

Conversely, revelation of evil's mundane face allows true paranoids to mistake innocents for enemies. And if everyone is a potential conspirator, everyone's a sanctioned target—as the people of Oklahoma City know all too well. ☹

For all her cynicism, Agent Scully must eventually admit that Mulder is correct: The truth is out there. The audience would stand for nothing less.

tabloids makes sense in the conspiracy-thick world of *Men in Black*.

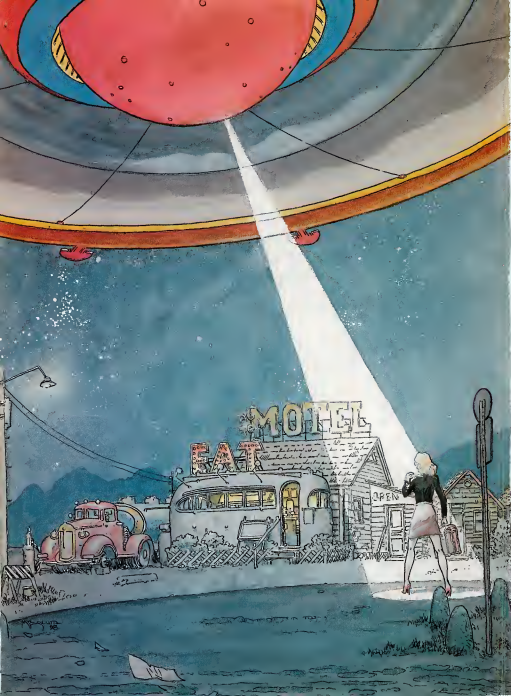
The potential price to be paid for that secret knowledge is at the heart of Darren Aronofsky's brilliantly original science fiction thriller, it. For ten years, mathematician Maximillian Cohen (Sean Gullette) has worked at decoding the numerical pattern beneath the stock market's ordered chaos. The closer he gets to a solution, the more chaotic his life becomes. He is pursued by a Wall Street firm bent on cornering the market, as well as a Kabbalah sect whose members think he's stumbled upon the long-lost mathematical key to the Torah. Is the solution worth risking isolation from the rest of mankind? Like the rest of the film, Cohen's answer to that question will startle and unsettle you.

The liberating nature of conspiracist thinking is another reason for its appeal as an SF theme. With the

ever been or done has been determined by a group of ominous beings known as The Strangers. Once he realizes that, it doesn't really matter if he killed all those people or not. He wasn't in control of his own life.

At the same time the characters at the heart of these massive conspiracies are freed of responsibility, they're granted incredible power. Because he is the center of the universe for the billions of people watching his televised life, Truman Burbank can do and say anything he wants. He can walk into traffic, hold up his hands, and cars will stop without hesitation. As with Robert DeNiro's guerrilla handyman in the dystopian masterpiece *Brazil*, Truman's most mundane act of defiance takes on heroic proportions because of the scope and might of his unseen adversary.

The sense of order and power granted by conspiracist thinking is illusory, of course, but the American public has never been frightened away



*If it wasn't for marketing, Misty might still be single.
Or she'd have a husband with only two eyes.*

BY S. N. DYER

My PSYCHIC PAL had told me she'd won the Georgia lottery and was going to marry her high school sweetheart, buy a double-wide, and move to Alabama, so I was real surprised to hear her voice when I called the Psychic Weather Hotline.

"Psychic Weather Hotline. . . . Let's see, you're calling from . . . I can't feel it . . ."

I was thinking how she sounded kind of familiar.

"There's something blocking my powers . . . Some electrical interference . . . Is there something on your phone?"

"There's this sticker with the number for Domino's Pizza," I told her.

"Okay, peel that off. . . . No that wasn't it. Do you have something like, oh, Caller ID Block?"

I Married

"Yeah." The phone company gave it to me free, along with Caller ID, 'cause of all the obscene calls I was getting. Of course, the calls were from space aliens who don't have area codes and numbers you can trace, which is where it all started. The space alien trouble, I mean, not the unlisted phone numbers. Anyway, I turned it off. "Sorry. Better?"

"Much. Thanks, honey. Let's see, I'm getting the psychic vibration that you're calling from Big Rock in the River."

I was impressed. "No, that's the next town. Well, I drive through there a lot. Does that count?"

"I'm getting a picture. . . . Rain tomorrow, maybe, or it may be . . ."

Then I recognized her voice. "Crysalis? Crysalis, it's me. Misty, your Psychic Pal!"

from Space

"Oh. Misty. Yeah. Hi, honey. How's it going?"

"Why don't you tell me?" I mean, after all, I'm never really sure what's going on, and she's psychic. In fact, she's a certified psychic. I asked once how you got certified, and she said you take this real tough standardized test, like in school. Only you don't break the seal and open the booklet before answering the questions, and another psychic grades you.

"You're probably not doing so good, if you're calling.

Those space aliens bugging you again, honey?"

"Yeah, so I'm going to go to my parents in Springfield."

She hummed a bit, or there was some sound, and some clicking which I guess was her nails while she thought, then she said, "Snow there tomorrow."

"Wow, snow in Springfield, Mississippi?"

"Did you think I said snow? *Slow*, I said slow. Small town, speed trip." She clicked her nails against the table or something and said, "Weather's gonna be great. Have a nice trip."

"Wait, Crysalis. Didn't you win the lottery?"

"Yeah, sure, honey, but I gave the money to my cousin Sandy 'cause she has those kids and all."

Isn't that amazing? No one's nicer than a Psychic Pal!

"Well, I'll call after I get to my parents and let you know how it's going."

"That's sweet of you, Misty, but don't bother. I can tell it's going to be fine. And I won't be here. I'm going to win the Publisher's Sweepstakes and move away and marry Prince Charles. He's back on the market, you know."

This is so great. I mean, one of these days she's going to be in *People Magazine*, and I'll be able to tell everyone I know her.

the Stalker

I put everything in the car, and took the stuff in the fridge to my neighbors so it wouldn't go bad, and was giving the goldfish a bunch of extra food to last till I got back when the phone rang.

"Hello, Misty? What are you doing?"

"I'm leaving, you nasty space alien."

"Huh? Why? We were just getting to know each other."

"I don't want to get to know you! I'm going where you'll never find me! I'm going to my parents in Springfield!"

"Uh, is that in Illinois or Kansas?"

"You wish!"

"Missouri?"

I didn't say a word.

"Well, have a nice trip, remember to use your safety belt and don't drive if you're too tired and . . ." but I hung up on him. I mean, it's bad enough I get kidnapped by aliens out of my own bed and they do all this stuff that was probably really bad if I could remember it and messed up my

ILLUSTRATION BY MICHAEL WILLIAM KALUYA

sinuses, too, but then this space wonk has to go and get a crush on me so he's always calling with advice. I guess he means well, but boy, it just burns me up.

Well, by then it seemed too late to start—there's a bit of a rush when the sock factory lets out—so I took a nap. And I had the dream again.

I was right small, and there were scary people all around, and my momma was beating me and saying, "That there baby is for Satan to eat," and I woke up real scared.

See, I started having these dreams when I dropped a box of socks on my foot at work and it hurt and just didn't get better and I couldn't go back to work and finally they sent me to the company shrink and he said, "What is it that bothers you about socks?" and he hypnotized me and we found out I was scared of socks because my daddy must have socked me and done other things to me and all his hunting buddies must have too and that's why I don't do so good with relationships and I got disability and everyone said I should sue Daddy but I got him arrested instead and all his hunting buddies. My Daddy said he didn't remember doing anything to me but since I'd been hypnotized it must be true and he was sorry and they were all going to jail once they got some room there. About then I started having the dreams. And my Psychic Pal told me to "Get a grip," which I realized rhymes with trip, so she was telling me I should go confront my memories.

So by then it was late and I got only about as far as Chigger Holler when I had to stop at a motel.

It wasn't a fancy motel but it had this real pretty seascape and I was wondering where you could buy those because all I've got on my walls are those black velvet pictures I got at Graceland. It smelled clean, like Lysol and bug spray, and I fell asleep in front of the Home Shopping Channel and woke feeling myself drifting up to the ceiling.

"Oh, not again!" I said. It's just not fair. You shouldn't have to be kidnapped by aliens more than once in your life.

Then I heard his voice in my head. "I need to talk to you, Misty. If you don't want to come to the ship, how about I come down to your room?"

"No way!" I said. "I'll meet you in the coffee shop." The sign said *Open 24 Hours*. So I drifted back down to the bed, feeling like it was a dream but I knew it wasn't, and got dressed. I didn't put on much makeup because he was just a space alien, and I didn't want to, you know, encourage him.

I walked through the silent parking lot to the coffee shop. He was the only other person there, and he stood up and waited until I got into the booth and then he asked what I wanted and told the waitress. It was kind of classy, like an old movie, but you could tell from the way he was acting that he wasn't from around here, so the waitress talked real slow and loud so he'd understand. We both had the Big Country Breakfast. I hoped he had money or plastic, because it was kind of expensive, almost five dollars each.

"Thanks for agreeing to meet me," he said, looking away shy-like. Or maybe it was so those other eyes behind his ears could see me. They didn't look too weird this time, 'cause he'd done a comb-over. In fact he looked a little like a nerd, with

thick glasses and polyester shirt with a pocket protector. He had a slide rule in a belt holster too. You'd think he'd have had a computer, being he flies in saucers and all.

"I don't like you being out alone at this hour," he said.

"I wasn't out till you made me get out of bed."

He waited until the waitress dropped off the coffee, then continued.

"I mean going to Springfield. Girls shouldn't be out on the road alone. It's dangerous."

"You mean, like maybe I could get kidnapped by a flying saucer?"

"Dang! Are you always going to hold that against me?"

"It's not like I can just get over it. . . ." I stopped. He was leaning back all scared.

"What . . ." I looked around. No one but us and the fry cook, and I was just putting sugar in my coffee . . . *Sugar!* Space aliens were always telling you not to eat sweets.

I waved the sugar container at him. "This dangerous?"

"Put it down," he begged. "Refined sugar will rot your teeth and harden your arteries, not to mention being an unorganic food that robs your body of necessary nutrients."

"There's more to it than that," I guessed. I waved the sugar under his nose.

"All right," he gasped. "You know how crystals have magic power to tap into the world harmonies and power lines. . . . Well, sucrose is a crystal. It has great power. Purified table salt, too. Why do you think America is the most powerful nation in the galaxy? It's the diet!"

I was impressed, and sort of proud. I wished I could tell my high school civics teacher, and Daddy too, who'd almost been a Marine except he couldn't read good enough. Except I'm mad at Daddy, of course, over the satanist abuse thing.

"Look," he said. "You know my weaknesses now, okay? So I can't hurt you. But I'm real worried about you going all that way on your own. Let me tag along with you. I've got MasterCard."

I guessed it wouldn't do any harm, but we'd have separate rooms. I said so, and asked his name.

"Cochhhhhhhhh."

So me and the space alien named Kevin finished our breakfasts. We even found we had something in common. Seemed he liked maple syrup on his sausages too.

I know you're always supposed to let the guy drive, but it was my car and I was angry at him and besides, he didn't have a license. We made pretty good time, listening to the radio. Garth Brooks always makes me feel kind of sweet, so I said, "How come you're here on Earth and not staying home, wherever that is?"

"About forty light-years from here," he said. That made me wonder if he was really a space alien for a minute, 'cause I've seen *Star Wars* and I know distances are measured in parsecs or something. Kevin stared out the window at some cows and then a bunch of kudzu that was growing up over the pines, kind of like drop cloths on furniture when you're painting.

"Why am I here? I guess it's because Earth is the only planet in the Universe where women have less status than

males—so it's the only planet in the Universe where guys like me can get a date."

"Makes sense," I said. My cousin Marnie was a secretary for a company with lots of computers, and she says needs aren't real exciting or anything, but they earn good money. "A girl's gotta think about the future," she says. "Just sew your wild oats awhile"—I don't know why she's always trying to get me to take up embroidery—"and then when you're near thirty and your looks are starting to go, you can snag you an engineer. Worked for me!" Marnie's been married three times, and they all pay child support! So now she owns her own tanning salon.

About ten things started to look familiar, fields of cotton and sorghum. We rounded a little rise and could look down on the farm, where I grew up. I stopped to point things out. "See there's the house, and the barn, and there's the cars up on blocks in the front yard—that Chevy's been there since I was ten. And there's the fields. . . . Wonder what all those holes are?"

Kevin looked away, blushing. "Those are crop circles."

"Huh?"

"Some space aliens make them."

"What, like as a message or something?"

"No."

"Then are they like landing strips or something?"

"No!" he shouted, then got real apologetic. "I'm sorry, Misty, I didn't mean to be rude. See, when those jock soccer pilots get to drinking too much Sirian brew they do this as a prank, okay? Just a practical joke."

I didn't think he knew what he was talking about. No one would fly all that way just for a joke, right?

"Hey, look! Seems like they're having a party out in back of your house."

We parked and went to the backyard. It was a big barbecue, with lots of folk I remembered from growing up, and others that must be their kids grown up. Everyone was eating ribs and burgers and drinking beer, and the guys from the feed store had a couple guitars and a fiddle and were tuning up.

Mama and Daddy came over, and both my Papaws and Mamaws, and they all hugged me. "We're right glad you're here, sweetie. You're always welcome," which I thought was mighty nice considering Daddy would be going to jail soon.

"Who's this?" they asked, looking at Kevin.

"Just some guy I know. We're not dating or anything."

They looked like that was a relief.

"You aren't from around here, are you, boy?" asked Daddy.

Mama dragged me off and started loading tater salad on a paper plate.

"What's the occasion?" I asked.

"Well, kudzu kind of swallowed up the town park, so we volunteered our yard for the church social."

"But, Mama, I thought you and Daddy are satanists."

"Of course, sweetie. There's no reason you can't have a satanist church social, is there?"

I looked around. It didn't seem different from any barbecue I'd ever been to, except for maybe more hot sauce on the ribs. "So you admit being a worshiper of the Devil?"

"Honey, our whole church went satanist. Remember when

Old Preacher Man Goinsome was here? No, you'd've just been a baby. See, he was always preaching that we were sinners. We just couldn't please the man. Even when we didn't drink or swear and we put our money in the church plate, he'd say we had sin in our hearts. We were chock full of lust and greed and envy, so no matter how good we tried to be, we were going to go to Hell when we died. And around that time he had that big car wreck and we found out he was drinking and buying whores with church funds. So even the goodest man we knew wasn't no good in his heart and was going to Hell.

"So we all got together and discussed it and decided that if we were going to go to Hell anyway, we might as well be the favored ones, the ones in charge. So we found us a satanist preacher—that's Reverend Goodbody over there, pushing the kids on the tire swing—and started holding Black Sabbaths ever Sunday morning."

"Everyone's a satanist? Even Papaw? Does that mean you're all evil?"

"Shucks no, sweetie. It didn't change us any. We don't no more go out and steal and murder than most righteous churchgoing folk tithed and give up their homes and families to do missionary work. That's just extraordinary behavior, real admirable, but no one does it."

"But the baby sacrifices . . ."

Mama began to laugh. "Come over here now, sweetie. What're these?"

"Gingerbread babies?"

"Of course. We don't sacrifice real babies, no more'n Catholics drink blood and eat flesh. Babies are too expensive, and you get attached to them."

"So you mean . . ."

"Right. That memory of yours that's caused so much trouble—you were trying to filch the gingerbread cookie that was meant for Our Dark Lord."

I was right relieved. The band started to play, and I found Kevin and taught him to hockdown.

"You have two left feet," I said.

"So?" he asked. "Does that turn you off?"

"Not really," I told him. Maybe it was the home cooking and all those happy people in one place and the beer, but he was starting to look not so bad. I wondered if space aliens had medical/dental plans.

It was getting dark and we were still having a right good time, though it did give me the creeps when Reverend Goodbody blessed the bonfires by praying backwards. "How's he do that?"

"Just takes practice, like any language," Papaw said. "If you can learn Pig Latin, you can learn to pray backwards."

Suddenly there was a fuss, and Daddy's hunter buddies pulled up in their four-by-four and got out. They were sozzled. They shouted and grabbed the ladies and shoved a couple guys. You could tell by the rude way they were acting that they had to be space aliens. Or else New Yorkers.

"Hey now, settle down," said Daddy.

"It's your daughter's got us all angry," they said. "Just 'cause she remembers . . ."

"Remembers?" Daddy looked puzzled. "I didn't remember hurting her, but you all do?" He was getting angry. He knew it had to be true and all, 'cause I'd been hypnotized, but at least he was a nice enough guy that his subconscious blocked his memory.

"We didn't hurt her. Heck, no, Misty's too valuable to hurt. She's a perfect test human. We just kidnapped her when she was asleep and showed her consumer products."

I looked at Kevin, puzzled. "You mean more than one group of space aliens has kidnapped me?"

He shrugged. "Lots and lots. You're great in focus groups."

"Focus groups? So you're a . . . a salesman? A torturer? What?"

He straightened up and said proudly, "I'm a market analyst. We weren't torturing you, we were testing odors on you. See, the Galactic Clearing House Sweepstakes wanted to make sure their blow-ins smelled attractive to Earthlings when they started selling magazines here."

"You stole me from a good night's sleep to test perfume and mess up my sinuses?"

"Hey, you got paid. . . . Everyone in the focus group got six extra numbers for the Sweepstakes."

"That sounds fair to me," said Mama, and everyone nearby agreed. "Now, what're those rowdy friends of your Daddy up to? I never did care much for those boys."

Daddy's hunting buddies were holding Daddy and Reverend Goodbody over a barbecue, and hasting them.

"Are they working with you?" I asked Kevin.

"No way! We sell wholesale magazines and a chance at your dreams! Those are evil aliens. They sell vacation timeshares!"

Well, I'd just about had enough. I went over to the cooking table and picked up the big can of salt. I couldn't see no sugar, there was just Sweet 'n' Lo for the coffee.

"Salt's a crystal, right?" I asked Kevin. He nodded.

"Hey, you rotten space aliens!" I said, and threw salt at them. They screamed and began to shrivel up, like when you salt slugs. Pretty soon Daddy and the preacher were lying in slimy green puddles, and still covered with barbecue sauce, too. Someone led them over to the garden to hose them down.

One bad space alien deer hunter was still standing. "I'll get you for this," he said. He drew out a cigarette lighter shaped like a revolver and aimed it at us.

"Oh, yeah," said the fiddle player. "I'm real scared, right, boys?"

That seemed to annoy Daddy's friend, and he flicked the lighter. A bright red light came out of it and fried the entire band. And they were pretty good, too, not good enough for Nashville but it was a right shame.

"Hey!" said Kevin. "You're giving space aliens a bad name, and making me look chicken in front of my girl!"

"I'm not your girl," I said.

Kevin drew his slide rule. And a big old light rose out from it, like Luke Skywalker's light saber. Then he rushed at the evil alien, hit him with the light, and there was a pop and he was gone, nothing left but a sizzling sound, like bacon. Kevin put his slide rule back in its holster.

No one had ever fought for me before. "Well, maybe I am your girl, Kevin."

Things seemed to go real fast after that. Kevin and I got a marriage license and Reverend Goodbody hitched us the next weekend. I told the law I'd made a mistake about Daddy and got the charges dropped, so he gave me away and everything. Kevin's fraternity brothers sent lots of weird presents I couldn't identify, but it seems on their home planet the guys write the thank-you notes (and letters and Christmas cards, too), so everything worked out okay.

Our main problem was, Kevin was afraid to get a green card and he had to give up his regular job to stay with me, so we were living on my disability check.

But everything worked out. I won the Galactic Clearing House Sweepstakes. This alien guy who looked a little like Dick Clark only he had three antennas and was 2,000 years old (and didn't look a day over 1,500 according to Kevin) rang the bell when I was in the shower.

So we moved to Sirius, which doesn't have much by way of culture but the folk are good and it's close to Earth so I could keep in touch. Only the schools aren't so good, so when the kids came we bought a double-wide and parked it behind Mama and Daddy's house.

And that's how I met Kevin and got settled down and everything, despite all my problems. And one day someone called.

"Hello, would you be interested in a great vacation spot?"

"Well, yeah. . . . Crystal? It's me, Misty, your Psychic Pal. I thought you were going to marry Prince Charles."

"Nah, honey, you know what British men are like. They look good and they sound good, but their teeth are bad and they're lousy between the sheets. But enough about me. Let me tell you about Lakewood Resort."

Well, we thought the kids needed to get away in the summer, so we bought the timeshare. They say they're going to build the lake any day now, but we have fun anyway because the people here are nice. A couple of them even remember me and Kevin from the saucer focus groups. ☹



about the author

S. N. Dyer has published about fifty stories and a novel under various names. Her work has been nominated for the World Fantasy Award and the Nebula Award, and she has also appeared on the Hugo Award ballot for Best Author (about which she remarks, "Go figure"). In her life away from fiction, she practices medicine. She lives in the South—no surprise there—along with a six-toed cat . . . and cryptically neglects to mention whether that's per paw or a total for all four.

about the illustrator

Michael William Kaluta's work is familiar to comics fans and longtime readers of AMAZING Stories, which published several of his illustrations in the early 1970s. He created the 1994 J. R. R. Tolkien Calendar, and for the last two years has painted the covers for the "Books of Magic" published under DC Comics' Vertigo imprint. The upcoming CD-ROM game Secret of the Black Onyx is a showcase for much of his recent design work; some of the images and an overview of the game can be found at www.blueplanetsoftware.com.



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